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PowerPlay

DOOM 3

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THESE BIG GAMES

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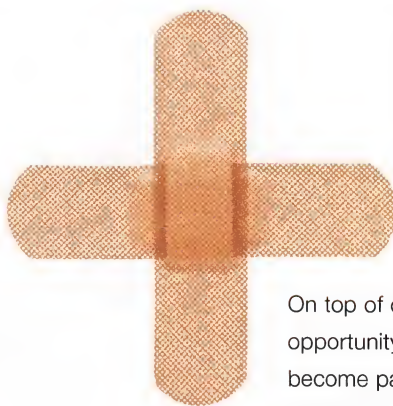


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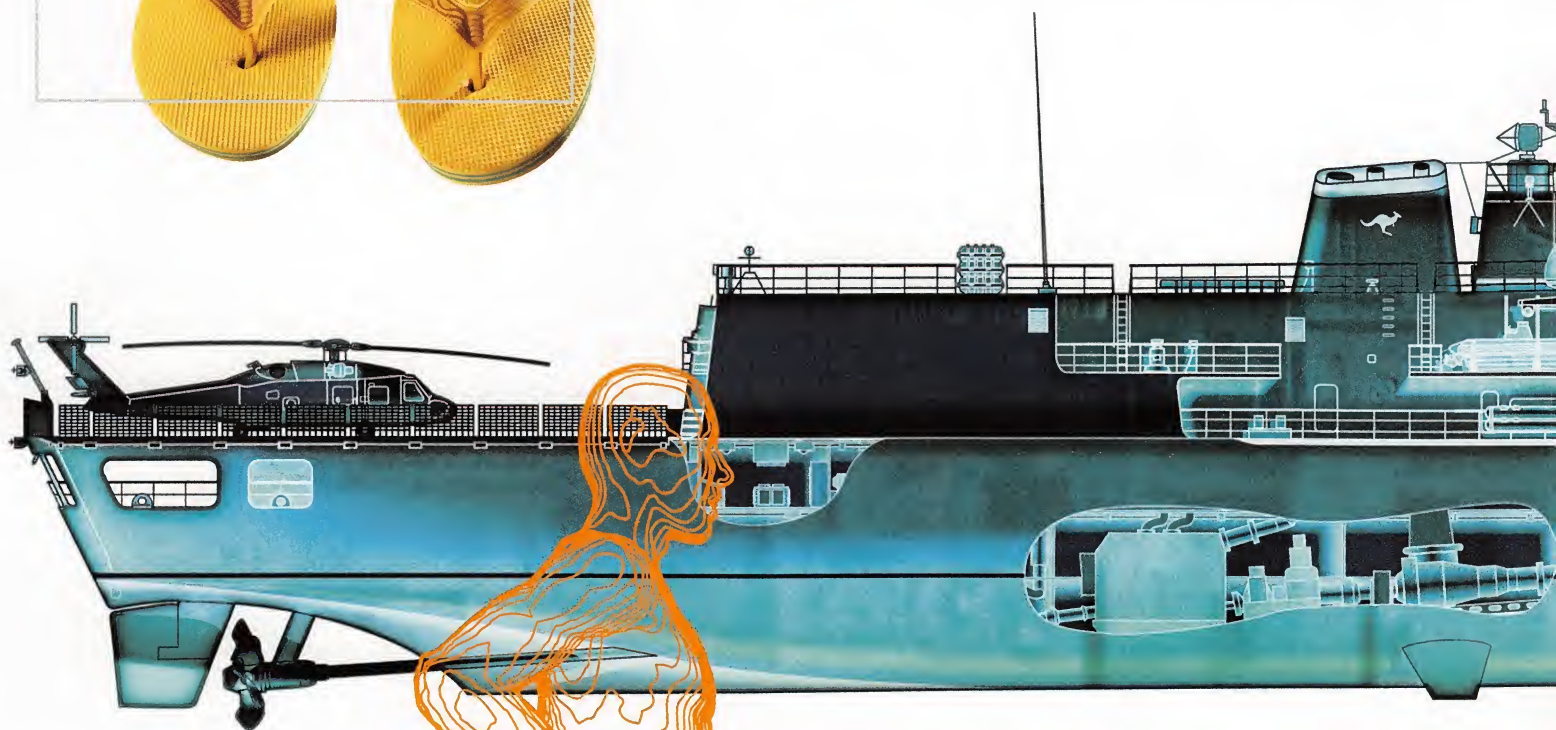
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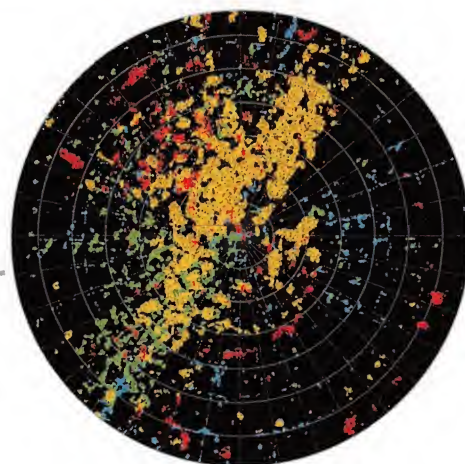
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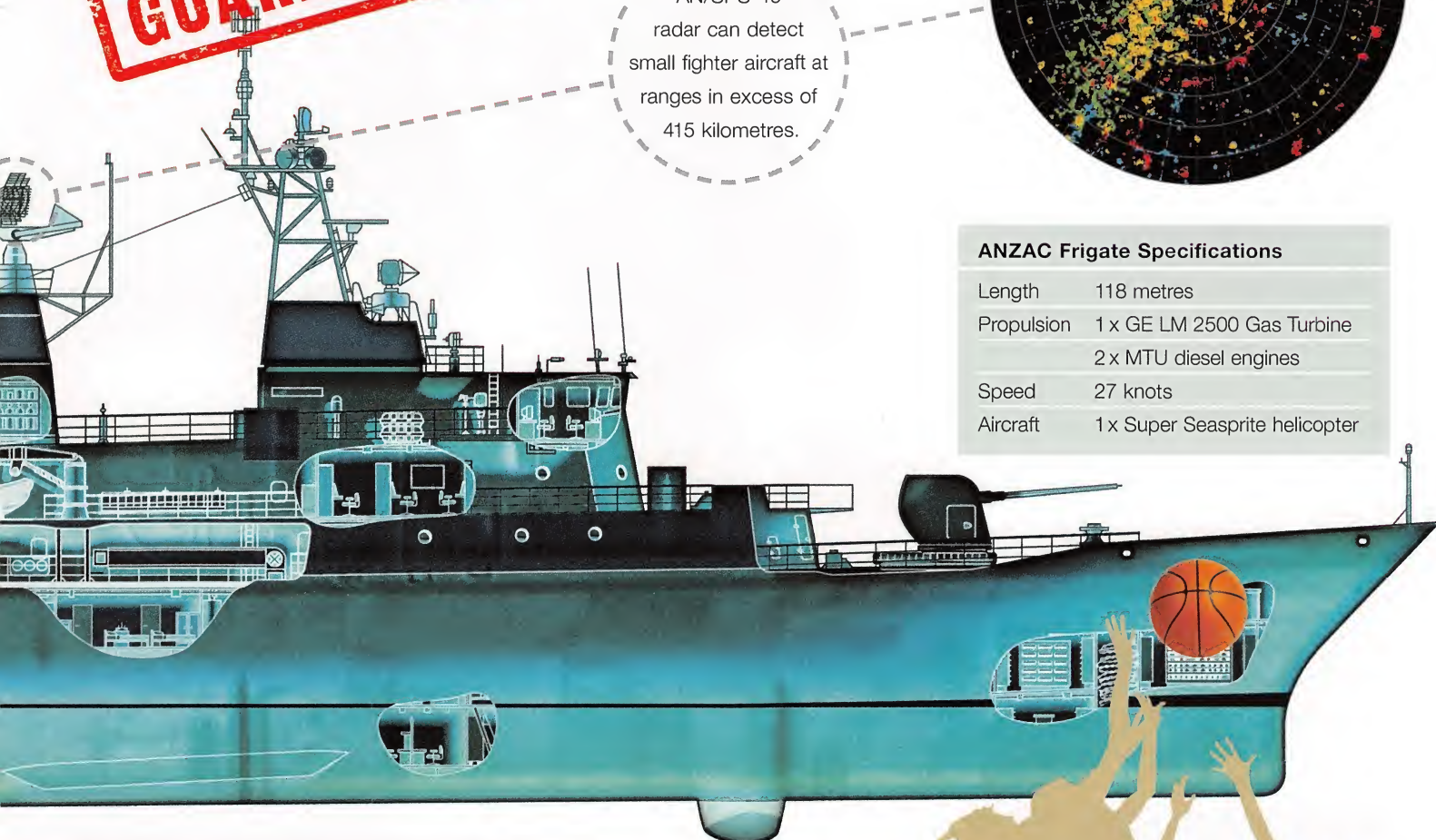
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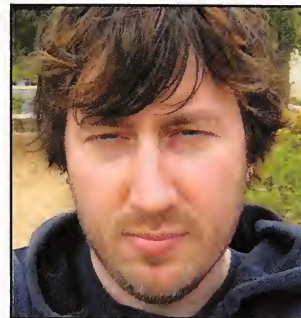
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SAMSUNG

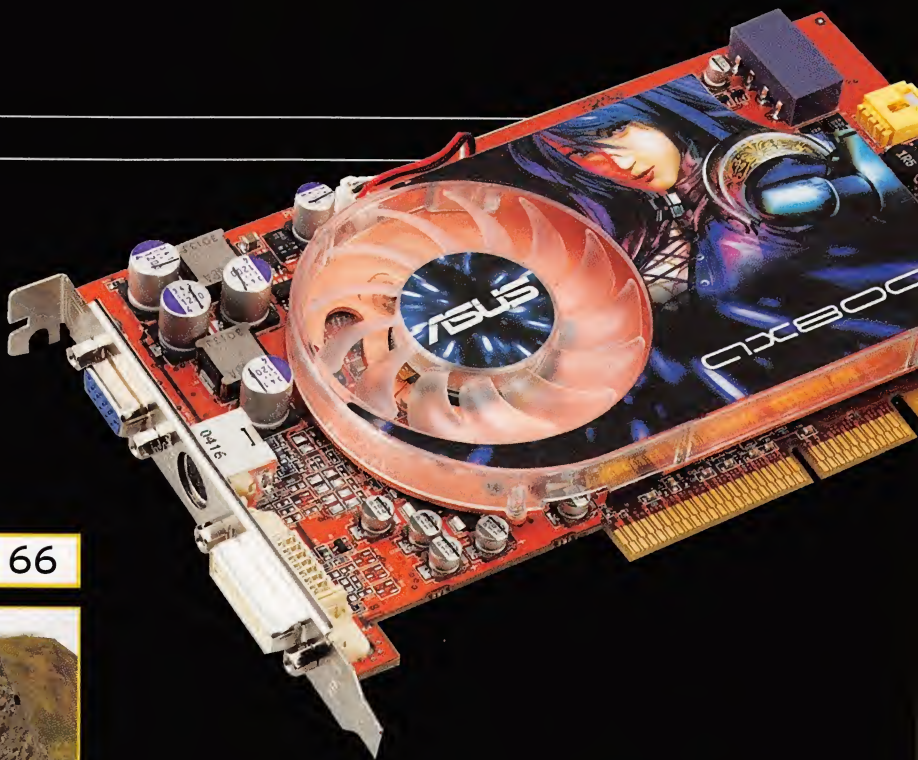
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DOOM 3 is here

Read our verdict in the world first review!



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where he is unprepared,
appear where you are not expected.”**

Sun Tzu-The Art of War

**“Ground Control II
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the strategy game of the year”**
PC Zone

**“We’re really looking
forward to the fully-finished
shell-shocker”**
PC Gamer

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A dramatic promotional image for the video game Doom 3. The scene is set in a dark, industrial environment with a fiery, orange and yellow background. In the center, a large, pale, humanoid figure with a wide, toothy grin and glowing eyes is shown in a dynamic, lunging pose. Above it, a smaller, more muscular figure with a screaming face is visible. To the left, a small, detailed head of a demon is shown. The overall atmosphere is one of intense horror and action.

PAIN

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Back to the future

Far too much of my time this month was spent playing CurveBall (www.fetchfido.co.uk/games/curve_ball/curve_ball.htm), an insidiously addictive Flash remake of Pong. The twist is the playing field has been rotated around the y-axis, creating a 3D space and placing you behind the paddle you control. You score bonus points for accuracy (when the ball hits the centre of your paddle) and curve (when you slice the ball with a flick of the paddle). It is everything a good remake should be; it retains the essence of the original (hitting that ball past the other guy) while ensuring any additions only build upon that foundation (the bonus points reward you for performing the core objective *better*).

There are several games featured throughout this issue that could be described as remakes. Our lead Insight story concerns Valve's efforts to update Half-Life and Counter-Strike with the Source technology they built for Half-Life 2. While HL Source simply takes advantage of some of Source's new features (such as physics and lighting), Valve is creating all-new art assets to ensure CS Source is more than just a novel nostalgia trip. We will have to wait and see just how extensively both games utilise the obvious technical advantages of the Source engine: will the physics simulation or potential for vehicle-based play and larger environments in CS actually change and enhance the experience? Will either title succeed like CurveBall or merely be Pong with a coloured backdrop?

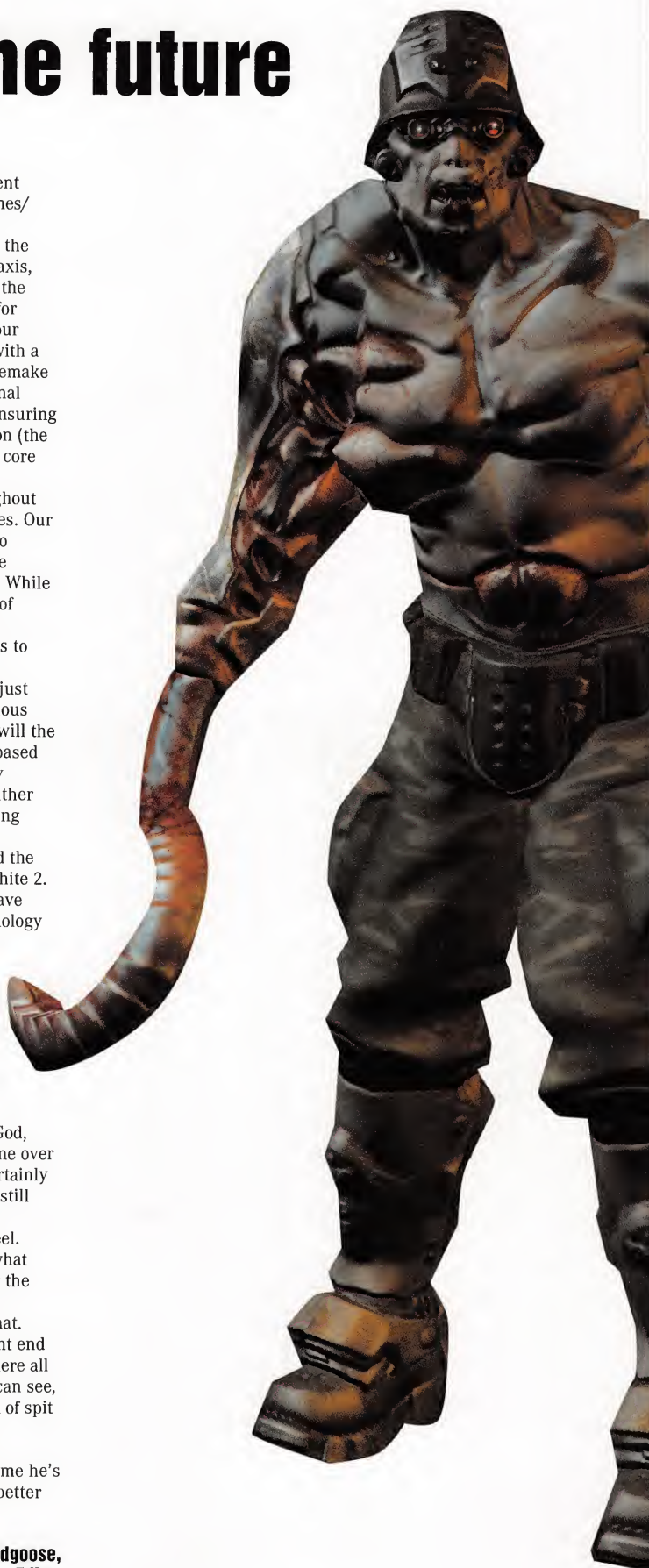
Two titles in this issue that *have* followed the CurveBall route are DOOM 3 and Black & White 2. The former is the game id Software would have wanted the original DOOM to be if the technology had been available at the time. The latter is the game Lionhead admit Black & White should have been in the first place, with all of the original's mistakes rectified and its strengths amplified. In both cases we see advances in technology enhancing the core experiences – being terrified and playing God, respectively.

Speaking of being terrified and playing God, we're also working on remaking the magazine over the next few months. Don't worry, this is certainly not going to be a major re-design – you will still recognise your favourite PC gaming mag as distinctively PC PowerPlay in its look and feel.

What we want to do is update our somewhat old-fashioned design and focus on providing the same amount of juicy gaming and hardware information in a clearer, more readable format. You'll notice the first fruits of this in the front end of this issue, from the contents page back there all the way through Inbox and Insight. As you can see, it's not a total overhaul, more an application of spit and polish. We think the results speak for themselves, and I hope you enjoy it too.

Unfortunately, Amos has just informed me he's topped my high score on CurveBall, so I'd better get back to it...

David Wildgoose,
Editor



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Dear PCPP



INBOX

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LIKE A DRUG

When I was around 6 or 7 I got Doom II for Christmas. Now I am 14 and I am still playing it. I am addicted to Doom. I think it is a classic. It was because of Doom that games these days are as good as they are. If Doom weren't invented, Quake would be full of sprites.

Now that the source for Doom has been released, you do a little searching on the Internet and you can download engine expansions that add 3D graphics and more features to Doom that makes it look even better than games such as Counter-Strike. If you don't believe me, download JDoom and its 3D model pack, high-res textures and detail maps and you have got yourself modern gaming.

Doom is like a drug. You play Doom on the Internet and there are thousands of people fragging each other. Nobody knows what you can unleash by doing a little modding, taking advantage of the engine resources.

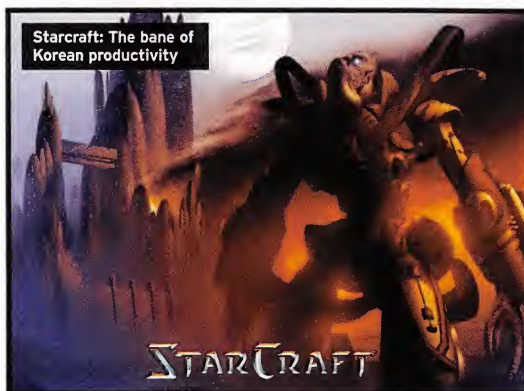
Sam Prebble

Proof that great gameplay is timeless. But a snazzy graphical update doesn't hurt either!

CENSORING GOONS

After reading the little tidbit of information on Game Re-Classification in PCPP#100 I can't help but feel a little disappointed. So a little name change is going to make one iota of a difference? Not likely – it's obviously just a smokescreen thrown up to give the illusion that these people are actually listening to community concerns.

Concerned parents have it all wrong. In some circles, an introduction of an R18+ classification is feared mainly because of a backlash from the community of "concerned citizens", but what these people don't realise is that games that deserve an R18+ rating are slipping through with an MA15+ classification, sometimes without any



modifications to the graphic content contained within. So what does this mean? Almost anyone can still go out and purchase them - I've seen 13 year olds buy extremely violent MA15+ games without even a second thought from the guys at the counter.

But what if these same kids tried to buy the same game with an R18+ rating? Would the cashiers have second thoughts? You bet your sweet ass they would.

Adult ratings would be a good thing for parents, as a more reasonable "simple, common sense" classification system would allow them to easily make the choice between a fairly violent 15+ game and a strictly adults only 18+ title. And in my opinion, censoring games to allow MA15+ classifications means exactly squat as these censored games almost always have fan-made patches to allow cut features to be brought back into play - at a click of a button all the OFLC's work can be undone.

I think its time for these censoring goons to get their act together - for the "sake of the children" they are allowing to be desensitised by their pathetically inept classification system.

Matthew J. Fathers

I think that pretty much covers the debate. We agree with Matthew!

RAW POWER

Woe is me! It was with some nervousness I read the news about the next gen graphics cards in PCPP#101. I splashed out as hardcore as I could muster last September on a games system. I was determined that my comp should not be relegated to crap after 12 months and that I could wriggle with glee in the phosphorescent glow of its intellect and future relevance. I even called the thing "Hologram" so that it might be even smarter.

My technically minded associates provided more advice than their work days should have allowed but I heard no mention of a generational jump in graphics cards on the horizon.

This will teach me for not completely committing to geekiness when I had the opportunity, having put in solidly at school, but all wasted as I crawled back to those whose gaze had not wavered seeking their information and raw power.

So a Radeon 9800 Pro became the backbone of my dreams and then (Snip! – Swearing Ed) I got the news. It may have been selfish but my immediate reaction was of fear for Hologram's future. And so I come to the point. I am a committed game player and need games to breathe, to feel, to know I'm alive, but I am not particularly rich. Do I need to purchase a



Ruth, PCPP's designer, on deadline

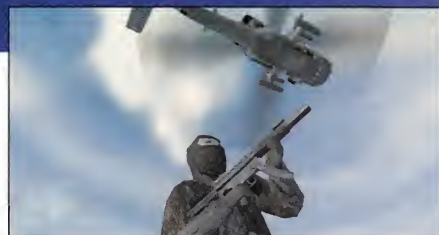
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next gen card to ensure my survival? Just tell me straight up, I can take it, I'll invest if you say it is so. Help me PC PowerPlay, (look sideways and crouch) you're my only hope.

Ben Kitchin

Don't worry, your Radeon 9800 Pro isn't on its last legs... yet.

REALLY OLD STUFF

We have a Windows 95 Pentium 1 and it's really old. It works okay and stuff, but all the demos on your demo CDs are all new games! Why not have some of those new games but with low system requirements or some really old stuff like Wolfenstein, Duke Nukem, Commander Keen, you know, for all us retro gamers out there!

A few more things, why do game makers have to make games with top requirements like a Pentium 4, and Windows XP? Why not the same games with lower requirements? Because the only games that work well and are up to date on our computer are The Sims and Half-Life.

Karen Pascoe

Would anyone else be interested in old shareware classics like the aforementioned trio? Anyone...?

HYDRALISKS ERUPT

When Blizzard finally makes Starcraft 2, I imagine that it will be far from the cartoonish Warcraft 3 with better visuals.

I see on my monitor a squad of ten blue marines, moving through shallow pools of water, the surface reflecting them and the sky, and being distorted by ripples caused by the marines' movements. The marines walk to their goal, sweeping the area with their rifles, sometimes looking behind themselves.

After a thirty second stop where they sat down and started smoking, they continue their trek with several tiny smoke trails being left. During this march a zergling erupts from the ground, flailing limbs, flinging dirt everywhere. Seven marines turn their heads when the other three start blasting, gun flashes briefly illuminating the soldiers.

Zerglings and hydralisks erupt from the soil, shedding dirt and gurgling. Some of them shriek when bullets puncture them, blood splatting everywhere. It becomes a bloody mud heap, several corpses still trickling blood from bullet holes and torn flesh.

Is my vision of this brought on by seeing the movie for Battle for Middle Earth, where the units reacted to the environment, starting off on 3D Studio Max at college, and hoping for news of a sequel?

James Donohughe

I suspect it is, James. It's hard to believe Blizzard wouldn't make a Starcraft sequel, but right now we have no idea when it might happen.

LITTLE JOHNNY

I am a current subscriber who just got his monthly dose of PowerPlay goodness and I noticed a little something that I just had to write in about. I am talking about the chance for new subscribers to win the pinnacle of gaming goodness, the answer to every gamer's dream, the one, the only, the wild & wonderful Beast.

I must admit that I have been a little overcome with jealousy about this. My subscription isn't up for a few months yet and while I still get the wonderful benefit of having my favourite mag delivered to my door, well, damn

it I want the Beast! Would it be possible for the occasional big prize to be offered to existing subscribers, at all, please? Oh well, there's always the Lotto superdraw to fall back on I guess.

One last point: in the intro to the reviews David mentions his despair at the PC games sales charts. I'm wondering where these charts are sourced. If it's from the big chains like Electronics Boutique and *shudder* K-Mart then a significant factor would be parents and grandparents walking off the street and saying "What would be a good game for my little Johnny". As I am married, have a mortgage and a little new born my gaming purchases are occasional, always carefully considered and definitely not based on the sales chart, and I am sure I am not the only one. So my theory is that these charts are heavily influenced by non-gamers going out and purchasing based on the sales person's advice - oh the horror!

Trevor Holland

The charts are sourced from all the major retailers as well as most independent stores. A significant proportion of game sales may well be from uninformed parents and grandparents, but that's hardly a reason to discount them.

TINY NITPICK

I would like to thank you for the review of Airborne Assault: Highway to the Reich, by Des McNicholas, in issue #101. I found the review to be fair and accurate, which puts PC PowerPlay ahead of the pack as most mainstream gaming magazines struggle to deal with wargames and simulations adequately. Give yourselves a medal!

I do have one tiny nitpick though: in the review summary, under "ONLINE", there is just the comment "I'm impressed you spotted the lack of a url here". Actually, AA:HTTR does have an online presence: Game website: <http://www.highwaytohereich.com/> Panther Games (developer) website: <http://www.panthergames.com/> Matrix Games (publisher) website: <http://www.matrixgames.com/> Game forum: <http://www.matrixgames.com/forums/>) The Drop Zone (fan site): <http://www.wargamer.com/hosted/DropZone/>

It would be great if you could get the word out to your readers on this!

Steve Long
Panther Games

Consider the "word" now "out".



If you do take this dare and would like to know what it should look like, please don't hesitate to email me.

Doug

Sorry Doug, we're still hesitating.

Are you concerned about using 'hardcore', 'military', and 'penetration' in the same sentence?

Daniel Cooper

Only when it's coming from Bennett.

It's a pity I am not a game designer because I'd definitely make millions from the simple yet exciting ideas I have.

Edwin Lee

Riiiiiight...



By the time we had finished he was shakin' in his boots while my adrenaline was pumping.

Louis Fourie

I think he's talking about Painkiller.

I hope you now have the idea that I like it.

Vaktar

You like it. You like it hard.

Tonight she takes it upon herself to watch Big Brother live over the internet right while I'm in the middle of a Call of Duty Search and Destroy mission.

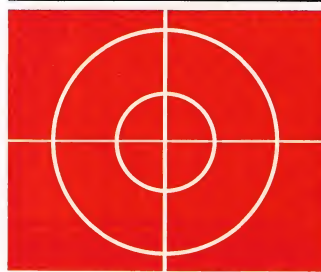
Eladd

If only you could search and destroy on the Big Brother set.

In your Top 100 (PCPP#101) you listed Neversoft as the developer of Tony Hawk 4. The actual developer is Neversoft. Since I pointed out such a critical detail can I have my free game?

Pecan51

No, because you are wrong.



Insight



Back to the Source

HALF-LIFE AND COUNTER-STRIKE TO BE REMADE WITH THE HALF-LIFE 2 ENGINE

Valve Software understands it owes the vast majority of its success to the community that has grown up around modding Half-Life. Let's face it, if it wasn't for the likes of Minh Le and Jess Cliffe tinkering away on mod projects such as Counter-Strike - and inadvertently revolutionizing online gaming in the process - then it's hard to imagine Valve's game continuing to be a best-seller some six years after its initial release.

Perhaps Valve appreciates the mod community because Half-Life itself can be considered a mod, built as it is on the foundation of Carmack's Quake 2 technology. With Half-Life 2 using brand new

technology - the Source engine, as it is known - they knew that many mod designers would want to update their work to run under Source. As such, making things easier for the mod community has been a priority throughout the development of Half-Life 2.

One of the first things Valve attempted was to write some tools to allow them to port the original Half-Life to Source.

"We discovered it wasn't quite as painful a process as we originally thought," says Doug Lombardi, Valve's Marketing Director. "Though we did discover a few things we could do to make it more straightforward for the mod authors wanting to do the same thing with their mods."

"Folks at the office started playing it and we realized it was more than an experiment, it was worth releasing. Once that was done, we wanted to run the same test with a multiplayer game and Counter-Strike was the natural choice."

Half-Life Source is a remake or, to be precise, a port of the original game on the new engine. Valve describes it as being reinvigorated through Source's physics simulation system, the use of shaders, enhanced lighting, shadows and other, more subtle improvements.



Counter-Strike Source was initially intended to also be a straight port, yet given the ease with which Valve has been able to make the transition it was evolved to be much more. All the abovementioned advantages of the Source engine are present along with completely overhauled player, weapon and world models, as well as new higher resolution textures. You can see the difference for yourself in the screenshots; CS Source is obviously a much bigger step up than HL Source.

"Doing the basic port work actually took less time than we originally thought," Lombardi explains. "However, once the games were up and running – specifically CS Source – we spent a fair amount of additional time creating the new art and sound assets.

Despite not having the same amount of additional work put into it, Lombardi still believes HL Source holds up as a single-player experience against many titles released in the intervening five years.

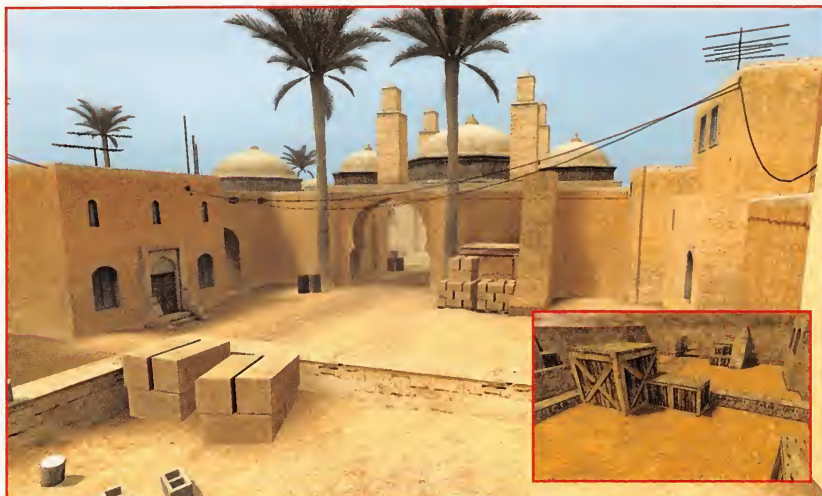
"I think the story, gameplay and some of the dark humour can still evoke an enjoyable experience for the gamer. And unlike re-releases of classic films, we have the ability to update the underlying technology and graphics to breathe new life into classic games."

Of course, it helps when that classic game is Half-Life, the genre-defining first-person shooter that still hovers around the upper reaches of our Top 100 each year (it was #11 in PCPP#101).

Both Half-Life Source and Counter-Strike Source will be made available on the same day as Half-Life 2. Our best guess at the time of writing is late August, but that is just a guess – an informed one, naturally, but a guess nonetheless.

Exactly how the two games will be packaged is yet to be determined. Again, we would predict that HL Source will either be a budget priced stand-alone release or included in some kind of Half-Life 2 Collectors Edition, while CS Source will surely be made available as a free download via Steam. That would be the best way for Valve to repay its mod community.

David Wildgoose



JESS CLIFFE IS THE CO-CREATOR OF THE ORIGINAL COUNTER-STRIKE. HE NOW WORKS AT VALVE ON CS AND OTHER PROJECTS. WE CAUGHT UP WITH HIM RECENTLY TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT CS SOURCE.

Tell us a bit about the process of converting the original CS maps to the Source engine. Have you been able to recompile the existing maps or have you had to recreate them from scratch? Something that we've kept in mind from the very beginning of development of the new engine is making the transition of content from Half-Life 1 to Source as seamless as possible. You can directly load up the source files to old maps and compile them to run on the new engine in a matter of minutes. Once you have them running in the new engine you can then start taking advantage of the new technology and capabilities. The more time you spend, the better your map can look.

Should mod-makers consider the remakes to be demonstrative of the capacity of Source's modding and editing tools? The Counter-Strike Source maps that we've shown are a good example of the power of the new engine. Compiling your classic map to run on Source is a snap and we then let the author go wild with particle based weather effects, specular and bump mapping, a terrain editor, physics props to make the map more lifelike. The list goes on.

The CS Source demo we saw at E3 appeared to make use of Source's higher texture resolution. What assets have you had to rebuild and what have you been able to port across?

The majority of our textures use roughly twice the resolution of the old textures. If you really want to make your map look great, you'll probably want to use all new source (Note the lower case 's' – Ed) material. Or hopefully you've kept your old texture source so you can use the higher resolution. The texture, as we have come to think of it, is only the tip of the proverbial iceberg though. Once you have the texture you can give it z-vector depth with the use of normal mapping or a wet and shiny look with specular mapping. Our



tools aid in the process of creating these new layers for textures.

What can we expect to see in terms of poly count for character models and the environments in both games? We haven't finalised this just yet for Counter-Strike Source. Suffice to say, the CSS characters will be quite a few times more detailed than their old counterparts. In general, a single room in the new de_aztec map has more polygons than all of aztec as played under the old engine.

How has the Source tech allowed you to expand and enhance the CS experience? Will we see the physics, weapons and vehicles from HL2 making an appearance? And what about a higher player count?

We've always been pretty adamant about wanting to make our environments more authentic and lived-in. The physics system is a great boon for creating a living, breathing world. That barrel you're taking cover behind may not be there once it's shot out; that wooden tent your opponent is hiding in can be blown apart, etc. The world is no longer static and this is the kind of dynamic gameplay we've been wanting for a long time now. It's funny, our designers have so much power now that we literally have to tell them to stop working on their maps and go home for the night. Possible vehicle-based gameplay and larger scale battles with higher player counts are two other scenarios we're actively experimenting with. These are exciting times with Counter-Strike.

Click and play

VALVE'S STEAMPOWERED ONLINE UPDATE AND DISTRIBUTION SOFTWARE IS BACK ON TRACK



ULTIMA X: DESCENSION

Another MMO has bitten the dust this past month with Electronic Arts finally deciding to pull the plug on the troubled Ultima X: Odyssey project. The game's future hadn't appeared rosy for some time now as it kept slipping down EA's release schedule until eventually it only registered as a mere TBC. The decision has been attributed to a desire to focus the Ultima team's attention towards (yet) another expansion pack for Ultima Online and a new UO related project.

"Steam". The very word conjures up images of the drop-forged parts of a locomotive, grinding and churning with mechanical power. Yet this word has taken on new meaning for multiplayer PC gamers. For some people it might represent a hassle-free way of keeping Counter-Strike fully patched. But for some, this word has come to symbolise endless computer troubles and their bitter love-hate relationship with Valve software, creators of the hit game Half-Life.

Steam is of course the free application released by Valve to automatically download and install updates or content for games in the Valve stable. It is also a system for downloading and purchasing entire new games. How can something that's intended to improve the gaming experience draw such diverse reactions? Read on.

Valve has over the years consistently expressed a desire to improve the online gaming experience for

players. In 1999, the Seattle based developer even launched a short-lived foray into making online gaming performance faster by consulting with Internet Service Providers, offering advice about how best to set up their networks. Coincidentally enough it was called "Powerplay". A rather pie-in-the-sky proposition, this project achieved minimal success and soon vanished. (The exemplary magazine PC PowerPlay thrived and survived, of course.)

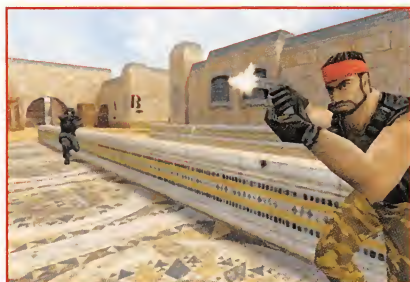
Undeterred by the earlier failure, Steam was announced in March 2002. It was proclaimed as a revolutionary new system that Valve hoped would bring about an end to the tiresome manual update process. This process actually challenges a percentage of gamers, causing them such inconvenience that they lag behind other gamers with their updates and can end up playing the game less often. And that's bad, if you're the company making the games. With the contemporary character of gamers becoming less and less technical, shifting into the mainstream, Valve sensibly saw the need for a 'hands-free' updating solution.

And as a game creator, you can't conscientiously avoid game updates – not least because you need to counter hacks and exploits, but also to allow adding new content and features, the necessary life-line which keeps multiplayer games buzzing over the long term.

Steam's public beta test concluded in August 2003. Following this, the infamous drawn-out bug fixing process began. For ambitious products like Steam, there will always be a lengthy testing and implementation process, due to the manifold complexity of the thousands of different hardware and software configurations that players are using.

Steam's sophistication shouldn't be trivialised. It is a hefty back-end and front-end system, designed to spread out the terabytes of game update data that must be pushed over the 'net, to and from myriad automatically detected sources – and it has to do it quickly and invisibly. Part of the problem with rolling out patches is that on day one of the release, an enormous clog of people will simultaneously try to get the file. Steam cleverly gets around this by using "trickle" downloading – feeding the files out gradually, piece by piece at a constant pace. That way, the download time is spread over the entire time that your PC is operational – without clogging your bandwidth, network, or ISP in a single intensive hit.

Nonetheless, people were upset about the early bugs in Steam. One particular problem, which caused



INDUSTRY WATCH

With Timothy C. Best

We've seen some old-school concentration of talent in the past month. The creator of Might & Magic and Heroes of Might & Magic, Jon Van Canegham, has joined NCSoft. That means that he's joining Ultima's Lord British, Richard Garriott, just as Korea's dominating MMO publisher tackles the western market with City of Heroes and Lineage 2.

The next big team up injects Ron and Chris Millar into Lionhead. That puts two of the key guys behind Diablo, Warcraft and StarCraft in league with Peter Molyneux at a studio known for outrageously ambition projects. On the subject of outrageous, wacky game developer Planet Moon has decided to give PC games the flick in favour of Sony's upcoming handheld the PSP. Come on, we weren't that nasty to Giants and Armed & Dangerous! On the publisher front, Interplay is up to some interesting shenanigans. It seems the State of California closed it down for not having enough money

to pay staff or keep up their entitlements. Then its parent Titus declared bankruptcy. Interestingly, the folks from Interplay have been working from home and seem determined claw back into the game which may see properties like Fallout up for grabs.

In further ailing publisher news, Viacom's Chairman Sumner Redstone seems to want to make Midway a company of his very own. Financial assessments indicate that he's considering upping his share from 72.4% to 80% so he can take the company off the stock exchange. Maybe Midway's recent poor showing is all part of a diabolical plan ... yeah, that's it.

Finally, word on the street is that Warren Spector has left Ion Storm after 20-25 other employees were laid off. Eidos representatives are denying the rumours but, thus far, there has been no word from Ion Storm.



Steam to display a memory allocation error and immediately terminate on startup, was especially bad. On top of this, the support offered to users was in some cases lacklustre. Some users never even received responses to their email support queries about this showstopper issue.

But in fairness, people are forgetting that Steam is a free service. It isn't an automatic entitlement that was partly purchased when you paid for Half-Life or Counter-Strike. You're getting something extra for nothing. As a result, it's commercially sensible for Valve to manage support issues passively, by offering the community forums as Valve has done, allowing users to seek solutions of their own volition. But some players still act jilted, feeling as though their favourite game company has betrayed them in some way.

This ill-feeling was strongest around the time when Counter-Strike 1.6 was confirmed as the final non-Steam update for the game. The rants on Internet message boards were long and furious, hotly contesting Valve's right to forcibly shuffle everyone onto their new system, which some users didn't trust. Apart from objecting to the obvious technical issues, they cited the possibility that Steam was some kind of stealthy 'spyware', secretly collecting information about their files and computer, transmitting it to some unknown location where imaginary investigators pored over it by the light of a bare bulb in an underground concrete bunker.

The truth of this situation is easily debunked. The

CODENAME: AMAZING

Codename Gordon is a cute side-scrolling platform game set in the Half-Life universe. Created by German software house Nuclearvision Entertainment, it sees a 2D Gordon Freeman take on a single-player adventure, in a cartoon-adaptation of opponents and scenarios from Half-Life 1 and 2. The game was released exclusively for free download via Steam. Within three weeks of its launch, 600,000 people had downloaded and played the game. Every one of those Steam users had incredibly simple, "one click" access to it, if they so desired. A new standard has been set. Steam is the way of the future.

The Half-Life community contains some of the most intelligent, inquisitive and analytical software and hardware experts in the world.

Half-Life community contains some of the most intelligent, inquisitive and analytical software and hardware experts in the world. If there were a shred of evidence that Steam had some kind of spyware function, we would surely know it by now. Thousands of security-conscious players using the program are also interested in aggressively protecting their own privacy, in an age where this freedom is often challenged. Additionally, companies which produce spyware-detecting software packages have also analysed Steam and assessed it as posing no threat.

Also, Valve has responded to the most vigorous of queries regarding the program's activity. One particular issue users brought up involved the contents of the Steam cache file, which stores the downloaded content. Users had meticulously investigated the contents of this file - finding information related to their own computer and files. Valve responded with an open and frank explanation - the cache file is allocated to empty space, but not initialised. On FAT32 systems, this means that old data that was previously used in the allocated space may seem to be stored by Steam. But it is never accessed and progressively overwritten as Steam downloads content. The technical depth of this discovery ought to convince the majority of players. Steam is under scrutiny by the community. And it shall remain so. Trusting this assertion may seem like an act of faith, but remember you are taking the same risk in trusting and using Microsoft Windows.

Steam in its current state is now more stable and reliable than ever before. If you've avoided the bandwagon thus far, it's a great time to jump on board.

Ed Dawson



EAST MEETS WEST

In what barely a decade ago would have constituted a genuinely jagged alliance, US publisher Strategy First has commissioned Russian developer MIST Land to produce the next two installments in the Jagged Alliance series. After the collapse of original developer Sir-Tech, the fate of the venerable squad-based strategy game was left hanging in the balance. But now Strategy First hopes JA3 and the curiously named JA3D will bring the franchise to a whole new audience. Meanwhile, MIST Land's Vitaly Shutov has promised to build "fascinating games that keep the legendary soul and atmosphere [of the originals]."

Your equipment holding you back?

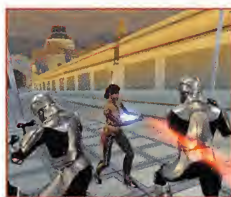


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FORCE SLIP

LucasArts has pulled a cunning switcheroo with two of its upcoming Star Wars titles. The Bearded One's game company has "force pulled" Knights of the Old Republic 2 forward from its original early 2005 release to a new November 2004 date, while Republic Commando has gone the other way, "force sliding" from this Christmas into the early months of the new year. It makes sense to us: KotOR2 is a known quantity in the capable hands of the ex-Black Isle guys at Obsidian; RC looks more than a little undercooked at E3 and could probably do with an extra few months of work.



It's true, PC games are getting smaller. The boxes in which they are packaged, that is. Visit any games store and you will see new release titles such as Thief: Deadly Shadows, Harry Potter & the Prisoner of Azkaban or Pro Rugby Manager lining the shelves in boxes barely larger than a DVD case. That huge cardboard box filled with little but air and cheap CD jewel case is definitely a dying breed. The reasons behind this switch may not be entirely clear, nor is it apparent just who is going to benefit from the move. We quizzed several of Australia's leading game publishers about this decision.

Owen Hughes, PR & Promotions Manager for Ubisoft, believes it makes sense to streamline games packaging in general. "It's beneficial environmentally and from a cost perspective," he says. "All current console formats adopted DVD casing from the start, which gives the product enough space to display all the information the consumer needs to know and is small enough to fit on retail shelves conveniently."

Vivendi Universal Games Marketing Director, Colin Brown foresees an advantage for the consumer through the "greater ranging of titles on retail shelves, especially with those retailers that have limited space available."

Basically, smaller boxes take up less space so retailers can fit more games into that same shelf space. This extra room gives more niche products more of an opportunity. It also should mean a longer shelf life for each game, since there's less of an imperative to clear old stock wasting space. Of course, in this business no one can be expected to be altruistic. Brendan Geraghty, Marketing Director for Electronic Arts, says the initiative has been driven by both publishers and retailers.

"It has been a discussion point with the industry for some time now. Publishers have chosen to launch into the new packaging format at a time when it made financial and operational sense for all parties concerned."

It's perhaps no coincidence that an earlier move to transition to slim DVD casing failed when EA decided not to participate. Both Brown and Hughes agree that the previous lack of industry wide support lead to confusion amongst consumers and retailers alike.

"We discovered that the consumer perceived the DVD packaged games to be sub-\$10 budget titles and that these games were often ranged spine-out on the shelf, thus effectively hiding them," Brown recalls.

"Many retailers observed that DVD packaged games were being overlooked in favour of titles in over-sized, foil embossed and die-cut boxes," adds Hughes.

But Geraghty cites EA's new PC packaging (a double



DVD width, solid plastic inner case, inside a slim-fitting cardboard outer box) as now being more appealing to consumers. "Improved durability provides the consumer with a permanent package to retain at home as opposed to a disposable cardboard box," he explains. While we would stop short of describing this sort of box as "collectable", the uniformity certainly makes for a far more attractive gaming shelf than the almost random jumble of shapes and sizes gamers had been used to. As Geraghty says, "it's a more up-market, premium looking packaging format."

What some older gamers may fear, however, is the loss of the lavish packaging of yesteryear - the chunky ring-bound manuals, the fold-out maps, the trinkets and figurines that made the old "cereal packet" boxes such a joy to open. Admittedly, few games were actually packaged in this way, but surely now the reduced box size all but rules out the possibility?

Indeed, Vivendi has typically excelled in this area - the art books found in Warcraft 3's special edition immediately spring to mind.

Hughes points out that Ubisoft sees a market for collectors with certain titles. "If a franchise has a long history and dedicated fan base we consider it for a limited edition. URU was the latest game Ubisoft released in a collectors box, packaging the game in a similar style to an actual book from the Myst games."

Yet he does concede that certain products may have been better served by larger packaging. "Lock On [Modern Air Combat], for example, would have been fantastic with an incredibly detailed, full-sized manual. Other titles get lost on the shelves. I think having room for more detailed pack art on certain games would help enormously.

"Oh and I miss the Ultima games with their tea towels and medallions too."

We miss them too. But at least we now have room on our shelves for them...

David Wildgoose

Steel Law

Developer: Red Redemption ■ Genre: Sci-fi/Conspiracy MOG ■ URL: <http://server100.steel-law.com/news.php>

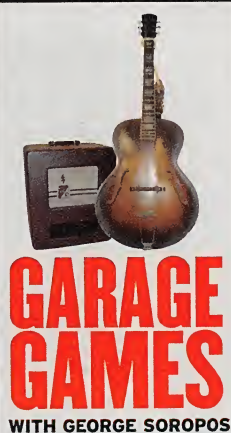
A massive generational city-ship ploughs through the inky blackness of space carrying a human cargo long gone from their terrestrial origins. It's a classic sci-fi concept, cliché almost, but one that has not really been used in a gaming context very often. According to all the appropriate episodes of Dr. Who we've seen, people on generation ships always tend to end up looking like a cross between Jesus and Tiny Tim (<http://www.tinytim.org>). They also spend a lot of time bickering, backstabbing and scheming. As the background for a conspiracy game it's perfect. We were lucky enough to get lead designer Gobion Rowlands down to our newly refitted interview facilities at Abu Ghraib to pick his brains about the Steel Law experience. PCPP: Tell us about the pen and paper game called Steel Law.

Why did you choose it as the basis for your game?

GR: Steel Law is a pen and paper RPG I started writing when I was eleven! Over the next 18 years I've continued to work on it and continued to develop the universe both in the game and through my writing and screenplays until it had matured into the game it is today. I still love game-mastering with my friends. I am passionate about Steel Law and gaming, and I wanted to bring that passion to the computer games I am fortunate enough to be involved in crafting.

PCPP: Steel Law encourages players to role play at all times, unlike a lot of MMORPGs...

GR: As much as I love them, most MMORPGs lack much of what I love in role-playing. Technically they are extremely impressive,



Lanning for Vengeance

WHEN A THIRD TRIBES GOES TO WAR

The latest in a popular series, Tribes: Vengeance is the first Tribes title that hasn't been developed by Dynamix, the US-based creator. Irrational Games in Canberra is developing this third title and boy, does it look exciting. Irrational Games are famous for the stellar Freedom Force and System Shock II.

This is Irrational's first foray into a multiplayer first-person shooter. PC PowerPlay recently attended the first closed beta test LAN, held at a secret location in Sydney. We had a hands-on with the game, which gave us a good nostalgia trip back to the first Tribes game. It's got a furious pace, with cool weapons like area-effect flaming napalm bombs.

We also caught up with Producer Tony Oakden and Michael Johnston, the Multiplayer Designer, to quiz them about the project.

PCPP: How long has Tribes: Vengeance been in development?

Tony Oakden: It's been in development two years and two months now, including the prototype. It's two and a half years altogether.

PCPP: Tell us about the new single player mode.

TO: It's a campaign. It's basically a level-based game like Unreal was. With the story told through cut-scenes and in-game scripted sequences. It's got a complicated story. It's a proper game. Like multiplayer, it's completely playable. You can play all the missions all the way through.

Michael Johnston: It's an entire campaign, of I think seventeen missions. With a very strong story behind it, written by the same author who wrote the System Shock 2 story. Ken Levine, our co-founder of Irrational, wrote the story.

PCPP: Obviously for multiplayer games, balancing and testing is an important part of the process. How long are you going to spend on your multiplayer testing and balancing?

MJ: We're at a point now, where today at this LAN, this is our official launch of closed beta testing. We've got a group of guys here is the first large group playing the game outside of the office. And so far it's going great. But we definitely acknowledge that now is the time for fine tuning, to bring everything closer together, to make everything polished. And that's going to go on for some months before release. We're still set to hit our release date of Q4 this year, and we'll be doing testing up until then. At some point we'll have an open beta test, so that



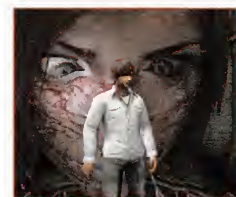
everyone can join in and download the game. And we'll do more tuning and polishing based on that.

PCPP: Tell us about the new game type.

MJ: There's a new game type called Fuel. Each team has a fuel depot near their base that stores a bunch of fuel. And there's also a large neutral fuel depot in the middle of a map. The name of the game is to fill up your fuel depot before the enemy team does. There's a few ways in which you can do that. You can take it from the neutral depot, or you can go and steal it from the enemy's depot. And of course that has the added effect of stealing away their points and if you manage to get it back to your base, you give those to your own team.

PCPP: Are there other game types?

MJ: We're shipping with five game types. There's standard CTF and this new game type Fuel, a game type from previous Tribes games called Arena, which we're shipping with. Which is basically two teams, who fight in round-based combat, and you each only get one life. There's also Ball, which is our sports game and Rabbit. Look out for Tribes Vengeance in Q4 2004.



ROOM FOR FOUR?

The hills are alive with the sound of... silence. According to Konami, anyway, who have just announced that Silent Hill 4 will be making an appearance on PC in but a few short months. The 4th in the seriously deranged horror series is subtitled The Room, apparently because the whole game takes place in a single room (plus, presumably, various transdimensional hell-holes). Take a peek between nervous fingers at this screenshot!

Ed Dawson

they have all the rules and the world structure which is great, but they rarely involve the players in stories and storytelling, which, for me, are the core of the role-playing experience. We are committed to trying to make worlds which generate new stories that involve the players as part of the storytelling process.

PCPP: What are the most popular character types?

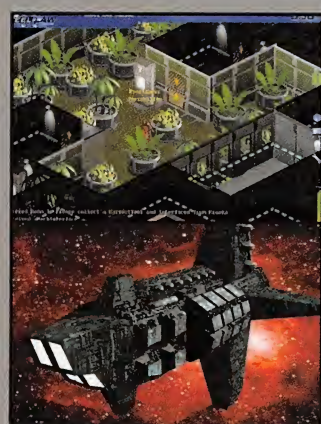
GR: Every character has a unique role, just like every organisation has a unique role. Unlike most games the balance of play isn't entirely on the character. Most online games punish you for not playing 24/7. If you are not

online, you are not gaining levels and are rapidly left behind by those who are. Steel Law Online is not about that. It is a game designed for adults and specifically for people who have been left behind by the mass of online games - those who want to play online games but have limited time. People like myself. That is why a good deal of a player's development goes into the organisation and factions they are part of. Those will continue to grow even when they are not online. Steel Law Online is fundamentally a game of competing co-operative teams. Also because it is a conspiracy game, unlike other games, in Steel Law Online

you don't have multiple characters with different roles, you have a single character that may have multiple identities, allowing them to operate in a range of roles and achieve personal and organisational power.

TAKE IT FOR A SPIN

By the time you read this the Steel Law beta should be over and the finished game ready for business. The main site for the game is very thorough and provides a wealth of information about the game world, character classes, abilities and a useful beginner's guide to setting up and playing the game. Steel Law is Java based and doesn't require a download.





MICROMANIACS

When not singing along to Indonesian karaoke, we love playing Trackmania. Those crazy little cars! It's just like playing a computerised Scalextric. Only without the rusting tracks. So we were rather pleased to hear there's a sequel in the works. The oddly named Trackmania Sunrise boasts much faster cars, new environments, two new game modes and even more support for the online community. Yippee!



WORK IN TAMRIEL

A few issues back we mentioned how the recruitment ads on company websites are often a good source of news when it comes to secret, unannounced games. And so it is again as we stumbled upon an ad on the Bethesda site seeking two programmers and an artist for which "knowledge of role-playing games and the Elder Scrolls series" would be an advantage. Ding! The light bulb flashed above our collective heads as we realised this could only mean one thing: a follow up to Morrowind is in the works.

Two cards are better than one

NVIDIA JUMPS ABOARD THE DUAL CARD BANDWAGON

It was only last month that we gave you news of Alienware's Earth-shaking dual video card solution, known by the glamorous title of "Alienware Video Array". We guessed that it wouldn't be long before a competing product would hit the PC gaming scene, but we certainly weren't expecting it to happen this soon. NVIDIA has announced that it is also launching the ability to run dual video cards, but instead of having to wait until the end of the year for Alienware's solution, NVIDIA's should be out by the time you read this. We were lucky enough to get a one on one presentation of the new technology by NVIDIA's chief scientist, Dr David Kirk.

NVIDIA bought the guts of 3dfx several years ago, but so far it looks like the only thing they've got out of it is the use of the initials SLI. Back in the day of the Voodoo2 this stood for "Scan Line Interleave", which was 3dfx's way of hooking up two video cards to give you twice the oomph. NVIDIA's new dual card solution is also called SLI, but this time around it stands for "Scaleable Link Interface". While it shares the same initials as the old 3dfx technique, it doesn't use any of the same technology.

Unlike the 3dfx analogue SLI, NVIDIA's is totally digital. This solves the image quality problems faced by 3dfx's approach, and as a result the output is as crystal clear as we're accustomed to seeing from a single card.

This technology isn't new, as NVIDIA have apparently been using it in the high-end market for around 4 years. But it's taken the introduction of PCI Express motherboards for it to become viable in the consumer market.

The first two cards to see the introduction of this feature are the PCI Express versions of the GeForce 6800 GT and the GeForce 6800 Ultra. While these cards can talk to each other over the high speed PCI Express bus, they also have a direct link between each other, via a small bridge on top of the cards that physically joins the two.

Like Alienware's Video Array, SLI uses a load balancing system to equally share the load between



the two cards. It can split a single frame up, or allow each card to work on alternate frames. While we weren't privy to any exact benchmark results, Dr Kirk said that NVIDIA has measured a performance increase of up to 87%. Drool.

However, there is one slight problem - we don't know of any motherboards that support dual PCI Express video cards yet. While the SLI solution doesn't need the full bandwidth offered by 2 x 16 PCI Express slots, being able to run on a single x16 combined with either a x8 or x4 slot, it does need two physical connections that are big enough for NVIDIA's x16 video cards.

When motherboards that are compatible with SLI are released, it might finally be a compelling reason for gamers to upgrade to a PCI Express platform. And while the thought of buying two \$700+ video cards right now is rather daunting, when those cards drop in price to more affordable levels, SLI will become a very attractive upgrade path.

Bennett Ring

BEYOND THE DIGITAL CURTAIN

With Anthony Fordham

According to developer Digital Spray (no comment): "You Are Empty offers players an alternative approach to the history of the late fifties of the XX century. Scene of action is the Soviet Union. Leading Soviet scientists start a big experiment that alter human physiology and mentality in order to create super humans capable of building bright future and communism all over the world. But something goes wrong..."

What? Something went WRONG with the genetically engineering Stalinist supermen? Come on guys, give us a likely game scenario at least.

It's impressive to say the least, that Digital Spray (no comment) has managed to create a STALKER rip-off before STALKER has even been released yet. Presumably they figured that if one bunch of ex-Soviets could make an FPS set in an horrific, radioactive nightmare world, why, the second bunch of ex-Soviets to set an FPS in such a world would logically be able to create a game TWICE AS GOOD. Because they did it second. Get it? This is the kind of thinking that permeates You Are Empty across the length and breadth of its Shockwave-heavy website. Use of www.freetranslation.com has led Digital Spray (no comment) to make use of the phrase "unique conventionalised environment of the Soviet totalitarian society" as one of the main selling points

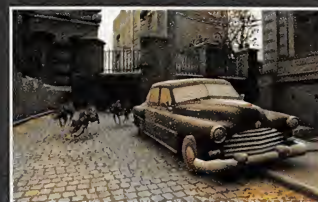
YOU ARE EMPTY BECAUSE STALIN ATE YOUR BRAIN



of the game. I'm gonna assume they mean "stylised" although, when it comes to Soviet totalitarian environments, You Are Empty looks pretty damn conventional thus far.

Basically, evil Soviet scientists, in their quest for a Soviet superman have instead created Soviet mutants. The player finds itself (for it too is a mutant) in a conveniently empty (though uniquely conventionalised) "big Soviet town with beautiful Stalin architecture" which has atmosphere described as both "dark" and "obscure."

The aim of the game? Figure out what the hell is going on, both in the big Soviet town and in the developers' heads. "A part of" the factories in the town "is still functioning" so presumably giant vats of goo will have an important part to play. Digital Spray (definitely no comment) maintains the game will be unique because the player must battle not only hordes of genetic evil, but also their own latent mutant powers. Sometimes, the player will enjoy super powers. Other times, they will get eaten alive. Hackneyed as the whole thing sounds, the game does lack the usual degree of self-importance most FPS seems afflicted with these days, so perhaps it will end up being an amusing romp rather than a system-thrashing chore. You'll even get to blow up statues of Stalin, apparently.



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TOP SORT

We like tennis. We spent the last couple of weeks up late in front of the box whilst Wimbledon was on. That Sharapova looks like quite the player, at least to our untrained eyes. If you know what we mean. We're not sure if the leggy Russian stunner (to use the British tabloid terminology) has anything to do with Microsoft's Top Spin tennis sim, but it hardly matters when all we actually have to tell you at this point is that Atari is porting the really-*rather-good* Xbox game to PC later this year. We'll be training our wrists while watching the US Open.

Which Way to the Library?

THE GAMES OF YESTERYEAR MIGHT BE GONE FOREVER
ANTHONY FORDHAM SEARCHES FOR SOMEONE WHO CARES

The National Library of Australia has 7.5 million items in its collection, and if you discount the likes of "interactive historical multimedia software", none of them are games.

For all of Big Media's shouting that games are now a major entertainment force and have a profound effect on our great nation's youth, no one seems very interested in archiving a copy of Grand Theft Auto: Vice City so we can check in ten years exactly what kind of thing we thought was worth being banned in 2003. The NLA indiscriminately collects everything published in Australia - so long as it's printed on paper. Other institutions such as the National Screen and Sound Archive take care of movies and music. But what about the games?

The industry is hardly slowing down. Thousands of games - as many as 5000 depending on who you believe - are released each year in Australia. Millions of man-hours go into development, publication and marketing. And each game sits on a store shelf for several months until it gets re-priced, tossed into a bargain bin and then eventually tossed out.

The sad reality is that if I wake up tomorrow with the urge to play System Shock - that's System Shock 1, not the more recent sequel - I simply have no place to go to get my hands on a copy of the game. Many turn to the Internet, scouring so-called abandonware sites for free downloads, which break copyright laws sure, but are offered on the assumption that most of the developers who created these old games no longer exist, so prosecution is unlikely.

Apart from the whole issue of whether or not archiving institutions believe games are important enough to preserve, the logistics of keeping these games available on a wide variety of hardware are nightmarish.



Collector and retro enthusiast Mark Warwick says he can no longer play many of the older games in his collection. "I still run a 486 with a copy of DOS 6.0 on it for things like the original versions of Doom and Doom2, Eye of the Beholder, the early Ultimas and Sierra adventure games like Kings Quest and Space Quest. But the problem is with games that run under Windows 3.1 or Windows 95. My original Red Alert discs work under DOS, sure, but I can't play the high resolution version under Windows without a Win 95 machine. And I don't have Windows 95." Sierra's Outpost - which never worked particularly well in the first place but still remains an interesting historical artefact - only runs under Windows 3.1, an operating system typically distributed on 3.5" floppy discs which have long since become corrupted.

"It's frustrating because every now and then I do have the urge to play one of these great old games. But I don't want to have to scour eBay or abandonware sites looking for a copy and I don't want to play weird remakes from sourceforge.net. I want to have a quick go, maybe over a weekend, and then put it aside. A library would be ideal," says Warwick. The NLA has no immediate plans to start collecting games, even those published in Australia, although NLA PR manager Yvonne Kennedy describes the idea as "interesting." It seems most archivists, professionals though they be, are either ignoring games entirely, or relying on the Internet as a sort of default archive, giving most interested parties access via abandonware, dodgy review sites and eBay. Eventually, one day, they'll probably wake up and realise someone should have been saving all this human effort for history. Hopefully, by the time they do, it won't be too late.

MOBY PLAYS

There are a few places dotted around the Interweb making at least a step in the right direction of a games archive. www.mobygames.com aims to catalogue and review every single game released for all platforms, including obscure stuff like ColecoVision. PCPP finds the site an invaluable resource for finding the release year and publisher for games most people have forgotten, like Magic Carpet (1994, EA). The site also tries to link most titles to relevant eBay, amazon.com or Chips & Bits search page, but success is flaky at best.



THE BEST GAME YOU'VE NEVER PLAYED #7 TAW: TOTAL AIR WAR

While some simulators use multiple aircraft to increase replayability, TAW had only 2. The first was the F-22 Lightning, which you could load with any weapon system you wanted, except napalm and nukes, then fly into combat against AAA and fighters. The second was the F-3B AWACS, in which you were a controller, vectoring aircraft to intercept, land or refuel, as well as jumping into an F-22's cockpit anytime you wanted. The best thing about TAW was the campaigns, which were 100% unscripted. You were sent to the Middle East, with the same countries in all the campaigns, but with different allies, some with the US, some with the French or China, and some neutral. You were told what your overall goal was, such as reduce enemy industry or

airforce to 20 or 30 percent, and you were away. If you destroy an AAA site, that area would be clear for a day or two, before a new one was moved in. Destroy an airbase, and enemy fighters will be forced to launch from further away. It was this fluid gameplay that made player choices matter, since bypassing a SAM site, and not destroying it, could mean trouble for a F-15E strike later. I don't why few people have heard of this game, but I could guess that it was because it came out a few months after several other F-22 sims were launched. As a result, maybe sim enthusiasts had had their fix of the Lightning. However, it was one of the most complete flight sims I have ever played.

Daniel Cooper, TB

Do you have a favourite obscure game?
Send your 100 word submissions to
letters@pcpowerplay.com.au with the game
title in the subject line.



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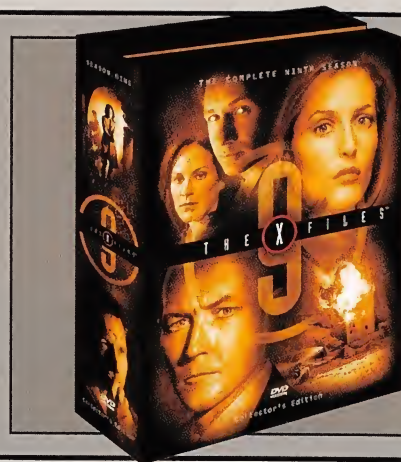
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WIN!

THE COMPLETE X-FILES

To celebrate the DVD release of the 9th and final season of The X-Files, Fox Home Entertainment is offering ONE incredibly lucky reader the chance to win a massive box set featuring all NINE seasons of Chris Carter's classic paranormal series. Yep, that's every episode of Mulder and Scully's investigations into aliens, weird experiments and government cover-ups. The total prize is valued at approximately \$700. To enter, answer this question on the back of an envelope:

Q. What is Mulder's real first name?



Send your entries to:
I can handle the truth
PC PowerPlay
78 Renwick St
Redfern 2016

WIN!

GROUND CONTROL 2

Real-time strategy has never looked this good. In fact, you'd be forgiven for thinking Massive's Ground Control sequel was an FPS, so shaded are its pixels and dynamic its lighting. It also plays pretty well. Which is nice.

So, thanks to Vivendi Universal Games, we have FIVE copies of the game plus FIVE special "Making Of" DVDs including heaps of cool behind-the-scenes stuff about the game.

To enter, answer this question on the back of an envelope:

Q. Name the alien race featured in Ground Control 2?



Send your entries to:
Operation Exodus
PC PowerPlay
78 Renwick St
Redfern 2016

WIN!

THIEF DEADLY SHADOWS

We're still playing Thief. A month on from our gushing review and we're still smitten. But if for some reason you weren't persuaded to buy (or steal) a copy then, well maybe you'd like to win one. As a thief, you're probably used to getting things for free.

We have FIVE copies of Deadly Shadows to give away, courtesy of Eidos. To enter, answer this question on the back of an envelope:

Q. Who ripped out Garrett's eye in the original Thief?



Send your entries to:
Sneaksie Mouse
PC PowerPlay
78 Renwick St
Redfern 2016

WIN!

EVERQUEST 2

Prumpy's getting excited. Yep, Everquest 2 is about to launch - it'll be here in August, in fact. And Prumpy, PCPP's dwarven mascot, can't wait to visit his old friends back in Norrath. We were thinking you might like to join him there...

Thanks to Ubisoft, we have FIVE copies of the imminent massively multiplayer RPG to give away.

To enter, scribble down your answer on the back on an envelope:

Q. What is the best cure for EverCrack?



Send your entries to:
I luv Prumpy
PC PowerPlay
78 Renwick St
Redfern 2016

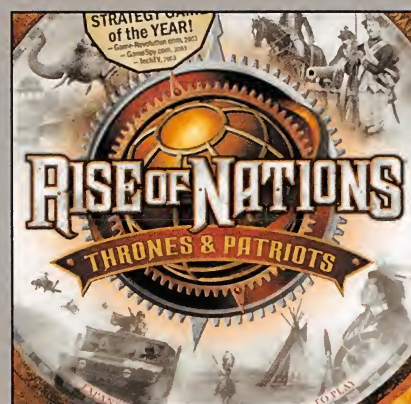
WIN!

RISE OF NATIONS: THRONES & PATRIOTS

Do you suffer from megalomania? Or a superiority complex? Do you desire power, prestige and untold wealth? Boy, does Microsoft have a job for you! Of course, it's the job of running the world from your bedroom thanks to the acclaimed strategy title, Rise of Nations, and its brand new expansion pack, Thrones & Patriots.

We have FIVE copies of each to give away, courtesy of Pulse Communications and Microsoft. To enter, answer the following question on the back of an envelope:

Q. Which Greek philosopher wrote The Republic?



WINNERS!

Apologies for the delay!
Your prizes will be with you shortly, if you haven't already received them.

PCPP#94 Knights of the Old Republic

WG Bowyer SA
Dale Stohr VIC
Chris Hearn ACT
Damian Kabaila VIC
Nicholas Jones VIC
Adam Knox VIC
Andrew Marshall VIC
Patrick Christianson QLD
Matthew Zerafa VIC
Brad Ward NSW

PCPP#94 Broken Sword: The Sleeping Dragon

Rob McGeachen NSW
Wes Cormick ACT
Peter McIntosh WA

Adam Burdeniuk SA
Travis Beesley SA

PCPP#95 Age of Mythology: The Titans

T Beckton QLD
Suryan Chandrasegaran VIC
Michael Siers NSW
Jessica Sindoni NSW
Oscar Bern NSW
PCPP ReaderX VIC
David Flanagan TAS
Owen Bowey SA
Richard Allen VIC
Andrew Semple NSW

PCPP#96 X2 The Threat

Korey Kube VIC
Travis Perry WA
Alistair Dunne VIC
Hamish Baro VIC
Justin Tudor VIC

PCPP#96 War of the Ring

William Micallef SA
Warren Sainsbury QLD
Adam Burden SA
Carla Lewenhoff ACT
Lui Kohl, Byron Bay

PCPP#96 URU

Jono Boswell ACT
Andrew Lugton QLD
Julie Marshall TAS
Kim Backshall WA
Paul Morse TAS

PCPP#98 Aural Pleasure

Kristopher Hen TAS
Murray Lake WA
James Gitson VIC

PCPP#99 Bring The Noise

Ben Groenen SA

PCPP#99 Duel Masters

Dean Crosswell QLD
Richard Ellis VIC

Justin Pape VIC

Mat Murphy ACT
James Charles VIC
Matthew Plazina NSW
Victor Supica VIC
Rohan Bunker NZ
Luke Larsen SA
Don Browne QLD

PCPP#99 True Crime

Josh McLean SA
Richard Tibbetts NSW
Richard Ellis VIC

PCPP#100 Could it be Magic?

Mitchell Manganaro QLD
Brendan Vince QLD
Simon Fraser ACT
Hugh Turnbull ACT
Richard Grunwald SA
Michael Kennedy WA
Melissa Harrold QLD
G Morris QLD
Daniel Luong NSW

Michael Bridgart VIC

PCPP#100 Altec-Tac-Two
Richard Allen VIC

PCPP#100 Retro Quiz

Jayson Logue QLD

PCPP#100 The Big Quiz

Alex Cullinan VIC

PCPP#101 Spiderman 2

Alex Chapman TAS
Nick Morrison QLD
Glenn Oliver NSW

PCPP#101 High Score

Richard Ellis VIC
Chris Lesbirel ACT

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DOOM 3

The image is a promotional poster for the video game DOOM 3. At the top, the title "DOOM 3" is rendered in a large, metallic, industrial font with orange and red glowing highlights. Below the title, a character in a green and silver combat suit, holding a large black gun, is shown from the chest up. Behind him is a large, dark, monstrous creature with a skull-like face and sharp teeth. The background is dark and industrial, with some mechanical structures visible. A small "TM" trademark symbol is located to the right of the title.

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HOTWARE

All the bits that we cram in at the last moment with Anthony Fordham

POLAROID IMAGE 1200

Price: \$220 Distributor: Polaroid Contact: www.polaroid.com

Here's a sensible-seeming idea. Take a decent digital camera and glue it to the top of a stripped-down dye-sublimation printer and you have the Image 1200, Polaroid's last ditch attempt at survival in the digital market. With the classic Polaroid cameras now about as popular as Warren Spector on the Ionstorm forums, it was either adapt or go the way of the 8-track and the Betamax. Fortunately for purists, the Image 1200 feels the same as a classic Polaroid camera, but has a 1.5 inch LCD on the back for framing up your shots. The bad news? The printing materials are still as expensive as the old Polaroid films.



MERCURY VERADO

Price: \$26,500 Distributor: Mercury Contact: www.mercurymarine.com

As I was watching one of the many fishing shows on Sunday afternoon television, I realised that there just aren't enough boating products featured in the pages of PCPP. So in order to in some way rectify this I now present to you the Mercury Verado, the world's allegedly most advanced outboard motor. This ain't your daddy's dodgy old two-stroke that stymied many a prepubescent prawning expedition, oh no. This four-stroke baby is super-charged. It's like a sports car, but for an aluminium dingy. Were talking from 200 to 275 horsepower in a range of 2.6 litre engines that perform the same as a 3 litre engine. That's as big as my crazy mate's Pulsar SSS. So if Old Man Rainbow Trout gets off your hook, you can just pull the starter cord and chase the slippery little bugger down.



TASER X26

Price: Illegal Distributor: Taser Contact: www.taser.com

Sadly, restrictive narrow-minded State and Federal law prohibits most ordinary Australians from importing and then carrying a holstered electrical discharge weapon like the X26, but a man can dream can't he? This is truly one of the most unpleasant devices for hurting other people ever designed, and Taser now makes a point of calling these "less-lethal" rather than "non-lethal" weapons. In other words, if someone shoots you in the face with one, you're probably stuffed. It may look like something Black & Decker would proscribe for fixing studs to six-by-fours,

but squeeze the trigger of this little baby and two hideous barbed darts fly from the nozzle to embed themselves in your foe, whereupon a juicy electrical charge is delivered into his very flesh. If he doesn't suffer a massive coronary and die immediately, he will at the very least become extremely disinterested in further trying to steal your iPod. The X26 may not have the same cachet as the Magnum .357 but it sure leaves less of a mess. Except in the perp's trousers, which is apparently one of the side-effects of being shot with electricity. Shudder.

LACIE BIGGER DISK

Price: \$1,750 Distributor: LaCie Contact: www.lacie.com

Actually, I'm surprised it's taken this long for a terabyte external hard drive to appear on the market. But here it is at last, 1,024GB of storage pleasure, more than equal to the task of holding half of the complete adventures of Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Or most of the good Simpsons episodes. Or a hell of a lot of Llama porn. While the uses of a terabyte of storage are many and varied, a central truth is not: this drive will make you more popular than anyone prepared to flame Warren Spector on the Ionstorm Forums. One thing I'm wondering though, once a drive hits 1024GB (that's 1,099,511,627,776 or more than ONE TRILLION bytes) should we still be referring to it as a "diskette".



ZENSONIC Z400

Price: \$369 **Distributor:** Zensonic **Contact:** www.zensonic.com

And you thought Japan was the home of sleek sophisticated consumer electronics. Enter Zensonic, a plucky company that designs its funky gear right here in Australia and then has it built God knows where. But still, following on the success of the Z300 which played almost every media format known to humanity, the boys at Zensonic have devised the Z400. At first glance, it looks less funky than its predecessor because it doesn't play discs. This is a wireless media player, sucking content off your PC and squirting it up through your TV or projector. Sit snug in your loungeroom while the groaning humming beast that is your computer is safely



locked away in the study. Enjoy video and images in almost any format, without all that tedious mucking around with video-out cables. Truly, the movie pirate's dream.

AUDIO-TECHNICA TITANIUM EARPHONES

Price: \$220 **Distributor:** Audio-Technica **Contact:** www.audiocubes.com



These earphones could make Mozart sound like an autistic child banging a spoon on the side of a metal washtub and I'd still buy them because they're made of TITANIUM. Titanium is undeniably the coolest metal in the universe, being as strong as steel and much, much lighter. Fortunately, these earphones also sound pretty damn swank thanks to the increasingly-popular neodymium magnets which are much more powerful than the standard samarium cobalt or aluminium magnets. Sure, these headphones are damn expensive, but they're made of TITANIUM! Other uses for titanium include men's jewellery and jaw-mounted anchor points for magnetised dentures. No, really.

SPECIALIZED EPIC

Price: \$2,900 **Distributor:** Specialized **Contact:** www.specialized.com

Mountain biking seems to be a popular pastime among IT freaks, presumably because biking can in some situations provide a similar rush to motoring but doesn't require all that horrible social interaction and cash you need to be licensed for and subsequently run a performance automobile. The Epic apparently delivers the "Holy Grail" of suspension by devising a clever system that only responds to shocks from below. The smoother ride is what bums have been crying out for, so you too can take on the mountain without first having to pack your goolies inside a complicated



double-knotted jockstrap. Check out the website for more complicated suspension statistics and tech specs that mean nothing to me. Also comes in red.

If you're serious about gaming you should be wearing one of these!



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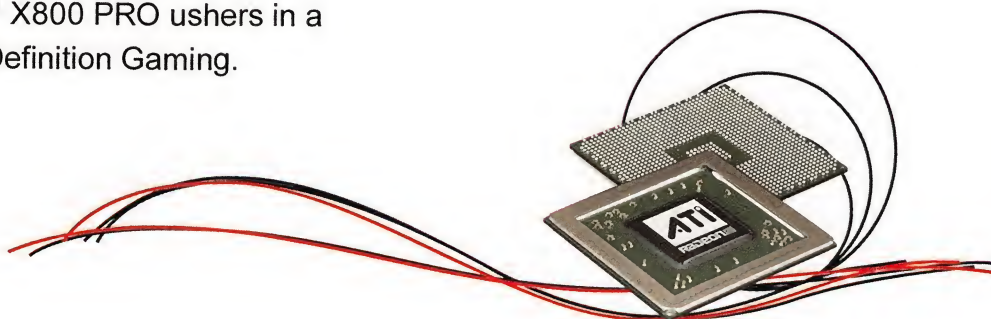
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ati.com





TECH TALK Jason Brown

Home is where the hardware is...

If you read the Restore-A-Disk review last issue (page 96, PCPP#102) then you'll already be part way towards appreciating this rant. I don't know about you, but it seems like we've been in a drought for some time now. I'm not talking about something as trivial as our diminishing water supplies, no, something much more important.

As far as PC technology R&D goes, the U.S. has Silicon Valley, Taiwan has, well, pretty much Taiwan, and here we have...maybe Silverwater Business and Technology Park? Now dip me in Watty! Red, White, and Blue external satin acrylic (with added UV protection please), and accuse me of short poppy syndrome all you like, but this is not a 'Buy Australian' speech. I don't particularly give two figs as to whether Australia has a finger in the PC technology kangaroo pie or not. What does befuddle me is that it's only the corporations in the highly esteemed white collar, blue chipped regions that are doing all the breakthrough development. You just don't see many small businesses making a name for themselves in the PC hardware game, not on this half of the pitch anyways.

In contrast, take a look at the software development community. You have your Microsofts, McAfees, Sierras et al, but you also have your Bob Jones, your Zoltan Miegleschleps, and your Mike Goodmans. Good old Bob, Zoltan or Mike might only be code-crunching away on a Frogger cum Desert Combat cum Zelda inspired masterpiece, but, at least the almost average Joe coder has a chance at producing something for the PC in line with their creative abilities and aspirations.

So why don't we have more user created hardware making a splash, at least in the lukewarm end of the PC hardware industry's toddler pool? Forget Garage Games, I want to see Back-Shed Southbridges, and Rumpus Room Rumble Packs. The PC industry owes a considerable debt to bedroom coders, how's about giving the hardware enthusiasts a shot?

The roadblocks and speedbumps on the path to amateur hardware development can't be blamed on anyone in particular. Not everyone



Anyone with a modicum of technical skill could tack together a \$20 Paddy's scooter and a few DSE optical sensors

can have a silicon wafer slicing plant in the kitchen, but there are other PC tech orientated development activities that can be taken up on a low-key basis. Game controllers, for example, have always attracted diverse thoughtfulness. We've seen a couple of genuinely creative devices emerge over the years, many of which could and have been designed by Joe Bloggs in his spare time. True, we're yet to see the perfect WASD and mouse replacement, but I'm betting that there's someone out there who's capable of coming up with one. Anyone with a modicum of technical skill could tack together a \$20 Paddy's Markets scooter, and a few DSE optical sensors, and voila, the Sharp scooter aerobic game controller is born!

We've had home-grown Australian peripherals pop up amongst the Sidewinders and the Wingmen, such as the racing cockpits from Hyperstimulator and Driving Force Cockpits. Interestingly, both these companies offer kit cockpits, making them 'hardware' by the more typical definition. But this sort of innovation

is still fairly low tech. If another step is taken, down to the level where microprocessors and memory clock syncs and NOR gates play, then even PCPP's tech readers might be getting out of their depth.

But then maybe we shouldn't need to. Software developers don't code in MachineCode anymore do they? Well only the guys that are 'a bit short of a byte'. I shed no tears over the disappearance of assembly language mnemonics, I'm pretty sure I reclaimed about a half-trillion overclocked brain cells from its death. Computer graphics libraries, visual programming languages and SDKs have taken a large proportion of pain out of computer game development, so why can't we have something that takes the untouchability out of hardware development?

I'll admit that I can be one to loaf on about meat pie in the sky ideologies. So it was good to see my ravings at least partially validated recently, thanks to one of the entrants on the ABC's 'New Inventors' program. This youngish

boffin was showcasing his modular electronic component system, which he'd labelled 'MicroBric'. It's basically a collection of electronic modules that when plugged together in a Lego-like fashion achieve your desired result. Perhaps a robot that cleans the lint from your belly-button, or a phone accessory that can SMS you when your mum starts gathering up your Battlestar Galactica memorabilia for Saturday's garage sale, or whatever. Actually it is slightly more limited in scope than that, but the principle is intriguing nonetheless, particularly from a PC perspective.

Imagine if or when similar components could be built into a single universal PCI card, one that could then be re-programmed to do whatever you wanted, via a software interface. We're not talking about an over-enthusiastic EPROM programmer here or a parallel to the masses of onboard components that now grace our motherboards - you know, the bits that are intended to add features, but only succeed in removing choice and flexibility. No, this configurable universal, programmable PCI card would light up the imagination of anyone who's ever wanted his or her PC to be just that little bit more useful in the real world. Sure we'd probably end up with 101 different variations of mobile phone card hackers/reader/writers, but we might also end up with the hardware equivalent of Counter-Strike or some other gear that VIA, ATI, or Realtek just never dreamt of. Perhaps if the device was portable, we'd see a whole new breed of wider industry products emerge overnight. And for anyone who succeeds in prototyping a new and useful device, the road to glory would be paved with riches.

Jason Brown was conceived in a petrie dish in the laboratory of an inner city telephone exchange. When not talking tech in these very pages he can be found translating impenetrable Taiwanese hardware manuals into English while being nourished intravenously by optic fibres carrying electrolyte.

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THE GUERRILLA GAMER

Dining with Royalties

And so the games industry continues unabated. The latest bunch of idiots to wander unerringly into my sights is Warner Bros Interactive Entertainment, the very same company that once refused to let Ozisoft make Matrix stickers for PCPP's giveaway Matrix PC, on the basis that they weren't going to get a cut of the 'action'. Or perhaps just to be mean, I dunno. Anyway, WBIE has recently decided that the best way to deal with flagging game sales is to punish developers for bad reviews.

The thinking goes something like this: WBIE is sick to death of developers riding on the success and strength of Warner Bros movie properties such as The Matrix and putting out crap games that sell anyway because the kids love the movie. So, if the game doesn't subsequently get a good average review score - as calculated by such scientifically dubious sites as GameRankings.com - WBIE will increase the amount the developer has to pay in royalties to Warner Bros per unit of the game sold.

In other words, if the game ranks less than 70%, then WBIE jacks up the royalties. As a result, the media megalith's favourite game is currently Enter the Matrix, which scored only 66% - justifying a hike in 'bastard tax' as I like to call it - but subsequently sold more than four million copies.

"Sales don't equal quality," says WBIE senior vice-president Jason Hall. Nevertheless, Enter the Matrix can only be seen as a win-win situation for WBIE. If only they'd thought of introducing the rule when the game was released.

"The games industry has had its time to exploit movie studios all day long and to get away with producing inferior products," says Hall. "But, with Warner Brothers, no more. Those days are over. And we mean it. This isn't just lip service. Honestly, the bad games are over."

Uh no, Hall, the bad games will still exist, they'll just drive the developers into bankruptcy all the sooner and line WBIE's pockets all the faster. It's a brilliant piece of doublethink actually, and as a fairly



Game developers goofing off for months and producing a game only worth pirating

duplicitous person myself I quite admire it in an angry, seething kind of way. WBIE can morally justify 'punishing' crappy developers and their crappy games, yet also expect to get even more dumptrucks full of cash rolling up to WBIE's gate thanks to the vagaries of the market and the gaming public's continuing love-affair with crappy movie knock-offs.

Perhaps we should take this a step further. Perhaps WBIE should offer to slip a little something into the back pockets of all those games journalists out there the next time a really big film comes out.

What I'm saying is that, we can take it as read that Prisoner of Azkaban will sell a bazillion copies on five different platforms, but if WBIE would only pay us to give it a bad review, well then they'd justified in hiking up EA's royalty bill and making 20% extra on the massive sales.

Because remember Hall's great wisdom: sales don't equal quality. They only equal popularity and

viability of the title. Sales only mean success. Sales only generate cash and capital for developers to go on making more games. They don't equal quality. I mean, look at it from WBIE's point of view. Ten years down the track, the people who played Prisoner of Azkaban on their long-since obsolete PS2 will dig the game out of the festering muck in the bottom of their basements and go "hey I remember this game. It only got 67% on GameRankings.com. How crap. I'm going to boycott Harry Potters 8 through 15."

Because this is WBIE's main concern of course, that crap games bring their crap films into disrepute. To which I ask, did Enter the Matrix make the Wachowski brothers so depressed that all they could make after it was Revolutions? Will the inevitably rubbish game version of Troy stop breathless Brad Pitt fans from buying the DVD - which incidentally will come out two years before the game anyway?

Of course not. WBIE's crackpot scheme to extract more cash from developers is nothing more than that: crackpot. It's cynical. It's shameless. It confirms what I've said all along: the games industry really doesn't know what it's doing.

Here's my tip to them: stop stuffing around trying to make more money from fewer games, and instead make more games. I mean really, how expensive can they be to produce? Sure, you've got your bloated development teams that all demand six-figure salaries and as a result of getting them then refuse to work for more than two hours a day, so games end up taking four years and costing ten million bucks to produce. But how much do you think id Software has spent on Doom 3? Not a hell of a lot, I'd say. Lunches for John Carmack and a set of new t-shirts for the guy who draws the demons.

If you think about this kind of thing for long enough you see how everything joins up: big media's obsession with the "recurring revenue model", ordinary citizens being treated like criminals for downloading an MP3 of a song from the 50s that the distributor refuses to release on CD, game developers goofing off for months and producing a game that's only worth pirating, not actually buying, and big game publishers looking at the success of a few titles and trying to figure out how to ensure that much cash comes in from every single thing they release.

WBIE made too much money too quickly, that's the bottom line. And now they want more. But instead of putting a smiling face on it, they're putting a self-righteous, toe-tapping, finger wagging, bomb-dropping face on it. Still, it's a US company, so why are we surprised?

The Guerrilla Gamer is a old-fashioned gaming journalist who is among a select number of people worldwide who are in hiding from no fewer than six secret services, including the CIA, MI6, Mossad, and those guys who just appear in the night and stab you in the eye with a railway spike. He doesn't go to the movies much.

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DEVELOPER DIARY



S.T.A.L.K.E.R Shadow of Chernobyl

Entry #6

Much about the experience of S.T.A.L.K.E.R is concerned with perfecting reality. In giving the player a believable environment to begin with and then improving that reality to provide the buzz we have been forced to examine every aspect of our approach. So not only will you find incredible graphical detail and high levels of AI, you will also be subjected to a game that feels and plays "just right". In this diary we will be looking at how the use of technology kick starts an approach to gameplay.

Let's lay the foundations for this. DirectX 9 is the latest, most powerful graphics technology and offers an amazing array of visual opportunities to the programmer. OK, keep that in mind then when we tell you that S.T.A.L.K.E.R goes that little bit further. The X-Ray engine utilised in S.T.A.L.K.E.R combines indoor and outdoor capabilities that are realised in up to 3,000,000 polygons per frame. DirectX 9 is harnessed to such an extent that it will be well into next year before you start seeing other games reproducing the effects we have created. In addition, we have developed a separate renderer capable of showing off fully dynamic lighting and truly soft shadows. Effects such as grain filters, colour saturation and image distortion will make for a truly tactile game – especially when we show off the abilities of DirectX 9 bump-mapping.

These effects will greatly enhance the atmospheric and thereby the gameplay of S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Imagine a scenario in which an underground area, poorly lit by a single torch and a handful of stray light beams, is home to a dangerous monster. Feel the pinpricks of fear travel down your spine as a shadow looms above you. It changes the way you play and affects your senses.

S.T.A.L.K.E.R's DirectX capabilities are worth summarising:

S.T.A.L.K.E.R is capable of more than 2 million fully bump-mapped polygons per-frame as well as true per-pixel complex light-material interaction.

By targeting the latest hardware we have been able to base the engine fully on HDR (High Dynamic Range) lighting to increase the quality by addressing unnatural over- or under-exposed visuals found in traditional renderers.

Natural render of complex materials with proper light interaction such as rusted metal, natural flora, glass, skin etc. In addition every pixel (not texel) can have its own material with several coefficients.

The custom built dedicated renderer is capable of real-time dynamic lighting, soft (physically correct) shadows cast from every object onto every other object, true per-pixel lighting, physical umbra/penumbra computations and hundreds of lights per frame – all in real-time.

Frame buffer post-processing and Photoshop-like effects.

And so hopefully, it begins to make you realise how S.T.A.L.K.E.R sets itself apart from other games. If these are the laws of physics then life itself stands a wonderful chance of being varied and

exciting. It is to this life system that we move to next.

As many of you will know, we have expended a huge amount of energy in building S.T.A.L.K.E.R's systems. They make for a perfect gameplay environment. Yet so far we have spoken little about what form that gameplay will take. Where, in other words, is the life of the game?

Many people have it that the life of an action shooter game is to be found in its multi-player capabilities. It's not the complete story in our opinion but it does hold a huge amount of importance and so requires an equal amount of attention. Producing an environment conducive to multi-play is an art form in itself and many, otherwise fine games, have been ruined by its mishandling. Map design must be done in such a way that experienced players can perform skilful moves without detracting from the pleasure of the professional blunderer who loves to rush through a level just for the thrill of it. It must have enough features to stimulate the most jaded among us and be dynamic enough so that we want more and more and more and more...

With this in mind there are two primary gameplay options to be found in multi-play. These are classical 'Deathmatch' and 'Capture The Artefact' which, before anyone shouts foul, is not merely a re-branding of the age-old 'Capture The Flag' style.

In our kill-or-be-killed 'Deathmatch' game the player has the advantage (or disadvantage) of the S.T.A.L.K.E.R physics system. All the details found in the single-player version are here to be exploited – either by you or your enemy – in order to achieve that one simple goal: kill. We have taken special care in

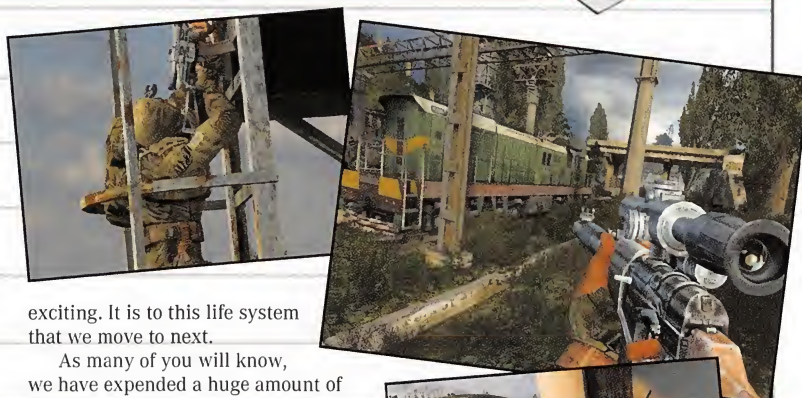
creating specific deathmatch maps that make the most of the high level environment and have balanced the weapon power so that survival becomes the key aspect. This is truly deathmatch for the next generation.

In 'Capture The Artefact' the player will be faced by a multiplayer experience quite different from the 'arcade' one they may have been expecting. This form of multiplayer rewards the careful player and elevates the strategic. Rather than opt for the blind rush to capture an artefact, we have chosen to implement some of the structures and objectives of the single player game. Nothing in this world is free and so to accomplish your goals you must plan properly and stock up on the right equipment. Watch out for anomalies though as just because it's multiplayer doesn't mean we are making this any easier.

As mentioned above, the maps have been designed for the specific game-types. The maps have been created, not just by GSC, but also by champion map builders Proteam whose work in the Counter Strike arena has been exemplary. Together we have designed, tested and balanced every inch of the maps to optimise the playing experience.

It is a long and detailed process that will soon be tested to the extreme by a hardcore group of beta testers. With their combined knowledge of multiplayer systems our game will be put under enough pressure to make all the cracks appear well before release so that you get to play in a perfect reality.

**Anton Bolshakov,
Project Leader,
GSC Game World**





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STRATEGY GIANTS



A game is a series of interesting choices," Sid Meier once said when asked to define this curious hobby of ours. As the designer of the Civilization games amongst many other acclaimed titles, Meier should have a clue. It's not just an apt description of gaming in general but somehow seems to perfectly encapsulate the strategy genre in particular, which should come as no surprise given the man's pedigree.

The choices come thick and fast in strategy gaming. What to build first? What to build next? How quickly should I expand? What should I research? Do I want to defeat the enemy by land, sea or air? Overwhelming numbers or guerilla tactics? Who do I need as a friend and who can I afford to make an enemy? Should this unit be HERE or THERE?

But maybe this is the most difficult choice of all: which strategy game should I be playing?

Over the next 16 pages **Timothy C. Best** and **David Wildgoose** take a look at some of the most significant and promising strategy games in development and attempt to steer you in the right direction. Following that **Anthony Fordham** runs through the Ten Commandments of Strategy Gaming, as he did for Shooters in PCPP#99, and tries to illuminate where we're coming from when we play and review a strategy title.

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Strategy Design

Black & White 2

The second coming is on its way. David Wildgoose rediscovers his faith...

Developer: **Lionhead** Publisher: **Electronic Arts** Distributor: **Electronic Arts** Due: **March 2005**

Do you rid the world of evil and bring it under the control of your benevolent umbrella? Or do you seek revenge by building huge armies and decimating the enemy?

"It's up to you," says Lionhead's Jonty Barnes.

Black & White asked some pretty tough questions of the player. Are you good or are you evil? Which animal do you wish to raise and nurture - the cow, the ape or the tiger? Do you want to save the poor lost villager or punish him in order to instil obedience? Which game box will you choose - the black or the white one? How many bloody trees do you want to pick up?

As the lead designer of Black & White 2, Barnes wants to ask even more and perhaps even tougher questions of the player the second time around. Not content with coaxing you into painful moral decisions with genuine consequences, Lionhead now wants to make you decide what type of game you wish to play.

Peter Molyneux calls it "morphing the gameplay". Based on your approach to wielding your godlike powers, the actual game mechanics will respond in



meaningful ways. Pursue a warlike mentality and you'll slowly find yourself thinking like an RTS general. Adopt a more compassionate posture and you'll edge towards focusing on economic and perhaps political concerns.

It's an intriguing premise: a game world that reacts to your action and influence in all-encompassing fashion. But didn't Lionhead make similar bold claims for the first game, only for the player

"In truth this can be seen across the whole game. Black & White 2 is not a traditional sequel - it's almost a whole new game, and as such the whole technology, code and art have been done from scratch. The result of all this is that you will now feel powerful as a god, in a world in which your every move is significant."

The role of the Creature was one of the more problematic flaws in the original game. As Anthony said in our review at the time, the Creature did potentially make life easier for you but training him to do it took more time and effort than it was worth. Additionally, you were never entirely sure what he was learning or even if he was learning at all.

In Black & White 2, the Creature's role is intrinsically linked to all aspects of the game. Helpfully, he or she doesn't need to be trained up from scratch: right from the start he can be your city building friend, a protector of the people, nurturing and looking after their needs; or she can be your ultimate war machine, an army general who delights in the suffering of your enemies (and probably your villagers, too).

This time around, Barnes explains, the player is given far more control over how to train the Creature. Indeed, this entire aspect of the game design has gone through a crucial evolution in Lionhead's thinking. The introduction of Knowledge Blueprints communicates to the player the Creature's array of skills and allows the player to direct his enthusiasm



Nice Threads

JONTY BARNES EXPLAINS HOW YOU'LL COMMAND YOUR FORCES

The army threading system is a way to link armies together in formations, and a way to easily control thousands of soldiers at the same time. It also creates a hierarchy of command.

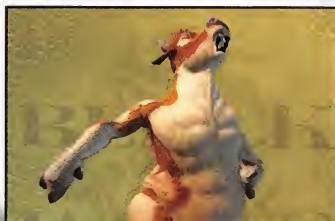
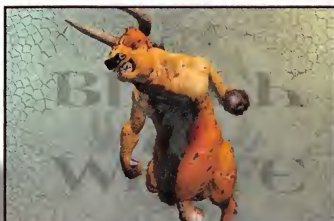
Army platoons are controlled by flags; when you pick up a flag, a thread is drawn from the flag to the platoon. If you then place the flag on another platoon you can link them together. Using this approach you can thread armies together in the formation you want (maybe melee fighters at the front protecting your archers behind), and then control the whole force together, sending your instructions to the whole group.

It's really a simple system of attaching one platoon flag to another, but the end result creates emergent behaviour. This means you can create huge armies with structured behaviour using siege weapons, archers, melee soldiers, and attach them to your Creature and watch the battle ensue.

to feel less like an omnipotent deity and more like a frustrated animal handler?

Molyneux readily admits he failed to deliver on numerous promises with the original Black & White (see panel, page 46). I asked Barnes just how they plan to address these issues with the sequel.

"We spent a great deal of time talking to the players of the original game, and running our new designs past the community to get the design as good as we could, and despite the success of Black & White we were very critical of its mistakes. You could view Black & White 2 as a marriage of new ideas and refinements of what worked in the first game.



The God of God Sims

Peter Molyneux created a new type of strategy game in 1989 - and coined a new term, the 'god sim' - with the release of Populous. At Bullfrog, he oversaw classics such as Syndicate, Magic Carpet and Dungeon Keeper. After founding Lionhead Studios in the mid 90s, he produced his most ambitious and perhaps most flawed game yet, Black & White. We spoke with Molyneux recently to discuss the upcoming sequel.

Were you happy with the first Black & White?

No, while I thought Black & White had some amazing features, was very ambitious and sold incredibly well, it certainly had its faults which in part were due to the fact we got a lot of pressure at the end of the project. So the faults it had in no particular order are: the player didn't feel like a powerful god, the world didn't change enough to reflect what you were like as a god, the tutorial was terrible, some players expected it to be more of a war game while others thought it would be a god game, and the creature intelligence was crippled by a stupid design decision.

There was an awful lot of hype driven by pre-release coverage of the original Black & White.

For the sequel, you seem to have adopted a much more secretive or subdued tact. Can you explain a little about why this is the case?

The interest in Black & White was absolutely phenomenal but there came a point where it took on a life of its own. One fan site reported that they had heard a certain feature might be put in the game then a second site would report that this feature was in the game then third fan site would say they'd actually played the game with that feature in it. It all spiraled out of control and wasn't healthy for the game or the community. So this time round we've tried not to let this happen.

What do you feel you can do better this time around?

First and foremost we need to listen to everything everyone thought was wrong with the first game. In terms of what can do better, we want the player to feel

like a god and to set the game in world where they can bring either war or peace depending on how they play the game. We want to give the player access to some amazing miracles and to play through a gripping and compelling story. Lastly we want to introduce a new concept which we call morphing gameplay.

Can you briefly explain what "morphing gameplay" actually means and elaborate on how it will be evident to the player?

We realised that while designing Black & White 2 we were talking about morphing graphics, sounds, the creature and the story and then it occurred to us that perhaps the most important element to morph and change should be the gameplay itself. In Black & White 2 you can create armies that attack villages, towns and cities, destroying and plundering everything in their path and if you play like this you are playing Black & White 2 more like an RTS player. If this is the case the Black & White 2 gameplay will change to cater for your strong RTS tendencies. The opposite to this is nurturing and protecting your villages, towns and cities and as this is more of a god game style then this is the way the gameplay will evolve. This morphing gameplay will affect lots of gameplay elements.

With Black & White, you really wanted to push the narrative to the fore and tell a good story. What can you tell us about the story driving Black & White 2...?

Black & White 2 story opens with the near extinction of the Greek people by the bloodthirsty Aztecs and this is where you step in as a god. The story, which is centred on the tales of your high priests and those of other tribes, is the start of how you save the Greek people by either war like or peaceful methods.

Lionhead and its various satellites are working on a number of titles right now - Black & White 2, The Movies, Fable, BC, and Dimitri, amongst others. How do you manage to focus your attention across so many games? And what is your role on and level of input into Black & White 2?

There are four games that I'm focusing on to some degree here

at Lionhead. Black & White 2, The Movies. Fable and BC. Fable is finished as far as my input goes and now I shall focus on Black & White 2.

What I try to do is guide from afar the projects that I'm not focusing on but get quite hands on with the one that I am working on most of the time, which is now Black & White 2. I suppose you could describe me as a Development Director.

I will be working very closely with Ron Millar who has just recently joined us from Blizzard - his experience on games such as Warcraft and Diablo will add another dimension to the gameplay and should be an amazing experience for me.

Many of your games would be characterised as "ambitious". When designing each game, do you deliberately try to throw as many things in there as possible, even if some of them don't quite work, as opposed to taking a safer, more conservative approach? Is it better to aim high and fail than aim low and succeed?

As I get more experienced - and I feel like I've learnt an awful lot

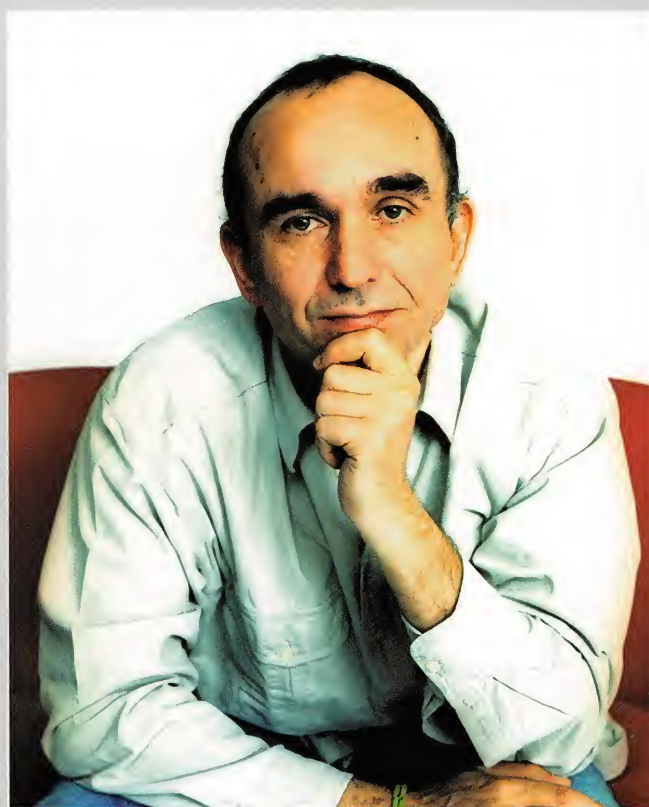
over the last five years - I would still say that ambition is very, very important. But just because you've thought about or even implemented an amazing new feature doesn't mean that it's right, and so if a feature doesn't work with the overall game it has to come out. I like to think that Lionhead stands for original unique games which are easy to play and entertaining

How has the PC gaming market changed in the four years since Black & White was released?

As a gamer I've been a bit disappointed by the fact PC games have not moved that far forward. I'm hoping that with the release of Half Life 2 and DOOM 3 that this might change but I have felt starved of really great PC games. I also think that great PC games are looking much more polished then they were four years ago.

As the god father of god sims, what does Peter Molyneux do on the seventh day?

I play with my son who is 18 months old and try to get him to play computer games... currently without much success!



for certain actions. He will also give you textual feedback on how he is feeling, what he is learning and what he plans to do.

Dispensing with the faintly ridiculous leash mechanic, the new Creature orders now allow you to give specific instructions to behave in a certain way – for example, “Be an army general” or “Maintain the city”. The end result allows more control while simultaneously removing a lot of tedious micromanagement.

According to the Barnes, the Creature behaviour is now more accessible and intuitive.

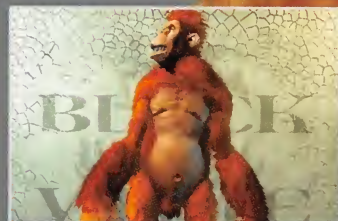
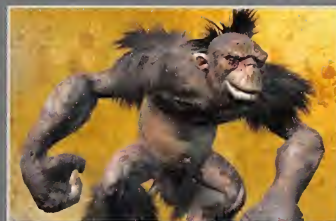
“Now you can rely on your Creature to focus himself on those tasks you’ve given without worrying about the consequences of what he’ll do once he’s alone. After all, you don’t want your Creature to experiment with your people in a way which will put you in danger!”

“All this combined with a new Creature interface makes him simple to control. You can see what the Creature has specifically been doing recently and reward or punish him as you choose.”

If Lionhead’s handling of the Creature aspect can be considered a substantial evolution, then much of the rest of the game is heading towards a revolution. If in the first game the player morphed the world and the Creature through her actions, then in the second game you’ll be able to morph the gameplay too. Black & White 2 doesn’t just evaluate your moral choices, it tracks the way in which you’ve acted upon them. In turn, it tailors the gameplay experience to suit your style of play.

“It really does extend over all areas of the gameplay including the story,” claims Barnes. “We really wanted the player to feel influential at all levels, and to morph the game around what the player enjoys most about Black & White 2.”

An evil god has fewer construction options, but sometimes torture pits can be just as persuasive to your cause



At the most basic level, good gods are more powerful at compassionate miracles while evil gods are better at destructive ones. The city of a good god will have more varied, beautiful and cleaner architecture to reflect the player's greater emphasis on city-building. An evil god, however, has fewer construction options, but sometimes a lot of torture pits can be just as persuasive to your cause. Likewise,

Clearly creating armies and conquering the enemy by force is evil as well as RTS... as well as fun!

the evil god has access to more diverse military units while the good god excels in defensive capabilities.

There may appear to be something of an in-built linear bias in that 'Good = God Sim' and 'Evil = RTS' but Barnes is quick to reassure that the calculations are more subtle than that.

"Every action the player does is evaluated," he begins. "For example, the very nature of building an armoury is seen as warlike and potentially threatening, which might cause the other races to become more hostile towards you. On the other hand, if you build the armoury but never actually create any armies, it's not going to accelerate the RTS game too much.

"Simply committing cruel actions - feeding people to your Creature, smashing them through

walls, throwing them over cliffs, etc - will certainly make you more evil, but it won't accelerate the RTS side of the game either. The features available are based more on the player's actions than an absolute Good/Evil rating - but clearly creating armies and conquering the enemy by force is evil as well as RTS... as well as fun!"

Speaking to Barnes and watching him demonstrate some of the sequel's new features - the thoroughly entertaining Creature animations, the new quick-pick-up command that allows you to (literally) suck up multiple trees or rocks or people with ease, the astonishing volcano miracle (ample evidence of the power of the physics simulation - see panel) - it becomes obvious that this is much more than just Warcraft 3 meets Caesar, far more than just a mish-mash of two genres of strategy gaming.

I may not yet be ready to begin proclaiming the glory of Black & White 2 from the hilltops - I think we've all learned from that mistake. But, you know what? I'm definitely starting to believe again.

The resurrection starts here...



Lava Lovin'

JONTY BARNES REVEALS THE INTRICACIES OF THE PHYSICS SIMULATION

There are two types of physics: solid object and liquid dynamics. These have allowed us to make a number of design decisions that would otherwise have been impossible. For example, landscapes are designed to have gullies where lava that can be poured tactically. Also, both you and your enemies can build up huge piles of boulders, which can be sent rumbling down upon opposing armies, trapping and crushing them. Everyone can reinforce their walls and doors by piling up objects wherever there are breaches, or by pouring lava trenches in front of troubled areas.

Because the physics engine is designed to respond to individual situations, our team is constantly discovering new ways to tactically use the physics engine. For example, we discovered that if you attach an army to a boulder as it breaches the walls, then the army will follow the boulder in through the breach.

Putting people into siege weapons also creates interesting situations, and as a result, we are experimenting with what happens if the soldiers are then launched at the Creature. The little guys will try to hold onto the Creature and attack him with their swords. There's a lot of fun that can be had using physics.



Evil Genius

Timothy C. Best wants you to meet Mini Tim...

Developer: Elixir Publisher: Vivendi Distributor: Vivendi Due: Q4 2004



Being a genius makes getting your Ph.D. easy; being evil makes it fun. It is into this world of back-stabbing strategy, kooky gadgetry, flamboyant assassins and cooler-than-thou secret agents that Elixir is planning to thrust unsuspecting players.

After months of careful undercover work – under the cover of a huge afro, and bad Jamaican accent, that is – I finally managed to get close enough to the Elixir's shadowy star council to peer into their cracked criminology.

From the likes of Creative Director Demis Hassabis, Producer Peter Gilbert, Executive Producer Adrian Bolton and Lead Programmer Alex Thompson, I learnt of secret plans, devious draughtsmanship and just what goes into being an Evil Genius. While how to hypnotise a super model with a cigarette lighter and a well-hummed Pringles advert I keep to myself, everything else is yours to enjoy, my dastardly little disciples...

Evil Empires 101

"There are five ongoing tasks that any aspiring Evil Genius needs to keep on

top of if they are to take over the world," reveals Gilbert.

"The first of course is base construction. No Evil Genius can be taken seriously unless they have a sprawling underground lair on a volcanic island, so the player will want to spend some time initially ordering the construction of a variety of different rooms and objects."

Of course once you start building, it's a slipper slope of adding new research lasers, cells and devious traps.

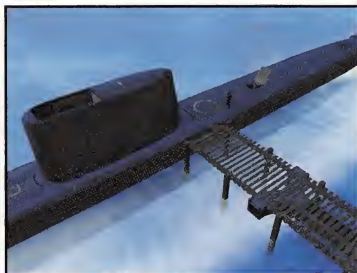
Then, once you have a base you need to fill it with cannon fodder and scapegoats.

Evil Geniuses have to make sure that they keep the right balance of thinkers, fighters and do-ers to keep their base running smoothly and to keep all important Doomsday research on track. With 12 different minion occupations, this isn't as easy as it sounds and once you have the mix right then you have to make sure that you keep up a training schedule because – let's face it – executing incompetents gets old pretty fast.

Next comes the good part: the

evil doing. To get the ball rolling you have to sow the seeds of your master plan by sending out minions and henchmen to set up support cells across the globe.

This is unlikely to go unnoticed so you will start seeing both your Notoriety and Heat ratings go up. Notoriety is how much respect you are getting in the underworld while Heat is how much international do-gooder organisations know about you. One draws kick-arse henchmen in funny hats into your service while the other draws pesky secret agents and armed forces.





"Obviously these impudent incursions should be stopped at all costs, but what is the most appropriate way of dispatching them?" asks Gilbert slyly.

"Perhaps by cunningly placing a Piranha tank, perhaps

unleashing the special abilities of a henchman, or setting the base to red alert? Capturing agents can be more fun than simply killing them...after all, once they are in your holding cells your Evil Genius can gain notoriety by gloating at the risk of the agents escaping."

The final stage involves your cells committing "Acts of Infamy". Whenever a mission is successful you'll find yourself one step closer to your goals. New items and cash will trickle in and soon you can have your research teams working away to unravel the secrets that will lead to your shiny new doomsday device.

All that's left then is working on that maniacal laughter.

Acts of Infamy Exposed

Any crackpot worth their wheelchair and white cat knows that evil missions and dastardly

deeds aren't as easy to come up with as you'd think. It's not like you can just spin a wheel or something. Okay, so Dr. Keno tried it for a while but it went really badly when he kept getting "Kidnap a Spice Girl". Once he had the complete set they started a reunion tour and we all paid for that.

In Evil Genius, once players establish cells they can set them to either steal or to plot. Obviously, stealing is going to nab you more loot, as well as those special items that you need, but it will also generate more heat. Plotting not only is safer but also gives your agents time to come up with possible Acts of Infamy.

Once such an act becomes available then the player will get a brief on what it's all about and what it takes to succeed. The actual missions unfold outside of your direct control so planning and

timing is everything.

"Each act of infamy is different and will require different skills of the minions and henchmen, so choosing the right team is the most important part in succeeding," Gilbert explains.

You get to see how likely it is your plan will come off and changing your team will change the odds, but be careful not to go nuts.

"Take too many acts of infamy on at once, and the Evil Genius will end up with precious few minions and henchmen to turn to on the island when the forces of justice start scaling the cliffs."

Better Lairs & Gardens

When secret agents come to call anything but a warm welcome would be just rude. At the moment there are about 30 unique traps that include killer bees, gas traps, piranha tanks and wind traps. What

makes everything more interesting is the way you can combine traps and tripwires, so that you can have a wind trap blow an agent into killer bees and then drop them into the piranha tank.

Beyond the fun of setting up ridiculously complex arrays of traps, players will get to go SimHideout with their overall base design.

Through simple clicks of the mouse, players can quickly change the blueprints on their island map – by painting new rooms onto them, into place on any un-mined areas – and then watch their minions make their plans a reality.

Once everything is confirmed your lackeys will take money from your strong room, buy dynamite and then get to work excavating the area. After the space is ready, decorating is as simple as right clicking on the room and choosing evil furniture and doo-dads from a context-sensitive list. Once again these orders will be recorded on your blueprint until an actual



minion makes the run to the depot, unpacks the gear from a crate and whacks it in place.

Good Guys, Bad Guys

As you can probably see, a big part of being an evil genius is ordering people about. Any thug can commit crimes themselves, but it takes a mastermind to run the show.

Elixir knows that and has gone to town with its supporting cast.

Besides the 12 different career paths for minions you then have the super helper also known as the henchman. These are guys in big hats, wearing feathers or using yo-yos as weapons.



A fine balance of emergent gameplay and memorable set-pieces is the aim

Elixir's Creative Director Demis Hassabis explains the power of the kooky offside: "Henchmen are incredibly important to the player, as well as all being completely unique characters in their own right."

These guys stand out. Hassabis describes a few to make the point like Moko the Maori warrior who summons minions with a roar, Papa Lazaarou the Voodoo Witchdoctor who comes complete with rumpled top-hat and Eli Barracuda the fast-talking New York Gangster.

Naturally, each of these characters gets special abilities as unique as their look. For example Jubei, described as "our sushi-slicing, silent, sour-faced samurai", can go into seriously brooding meditation to reset all of his stats. He gets to do that right off the bat but many abilities have to be gained through training back at base or by completing objectives. This, combined with a clever hiring policy, lets you customise your hench-force.

On the other side of the fence, are the forces of law and order, which are just as diverse, if not as colourful as the nere-do-wells.

"Agents come in all shapes and sizes, with thieves, saboteurs,

soldiers and investigators arriving on a regular basis," says Gilbert.

Super agents come from all over the world and use everything from rifles and plastic explosives to swords and throwing stars. To make things more fun, they also have their own strengths and weakness.

"Using the special abilities of your henchmen is very rewarding when it comes to thwarting the agent's plans, however it's also fun to watch complicated trap mechanisms capture and destroy them," he says.

If this all sounds a little like shooting fish in a barrel you have to understand that Elixir is pumping a lot of work into the AI of these little guys. Goal-based behaviour mean that agents will change their plans based on what you throw at them, and don't be surprised if they get a little ticked at finding a buddy in a cage or, worst, a body bag.

A Diabolical Plan

On of the big questions about the game is just how will it all fit together? Just how much freedom will players have to get all Pinky and the Brain?

According to Hassabis the game works on two levels. There is an

ongoing narrative that drives everything forward and which "provides a lot of cool semi-scripted moments, ensuring that the player never feels as directionless as they can in 'sandbox' games; but the core mechanics are essentially freeform, and it's up to the player how they choose to gain notoriety and manage their lair.

A fine balance of emergent gameplay and memorable set-pieces is the aim.

The choice of which Acts of Infamy to tackle and the way you do each one should give the player some extra choices as should the flexibility of the henchmen and different approaches to based defence. There are even three different doomsday weapons to aim for as well as a choice of three Evil Geniuses to play including a little man with a Napoleon Complex and an evil temptress named Alexis.

The Evil Genius premise is great, but there's a reason why so few evil mastermind-type games have come out: they're really hard to make. Giving players enough room to really come up with crack-pot schemes is just a tough ask, but it looks like Elixir is doing its level best... and even if the scheming is a little off, I'm thinking that watching super-suave Bond-types bounce around your death-trap of a base like a pinball will probably be worth the admission all by itself.



Battle for Middle Earth

Look out for the Orc rush, Mr Frodo!

Developer: EALA Publisher: Electronic Arts Distributor: Electronic Arts Due: November 2004

This is EA's big run at a Lord of the Rings RTS and it hasn't spared the Wargs. Battle for Middle Earth is licensed from Peter Jackson's trilogy and covers the sweep of anything that came close to touching the screen. There are approximately 25 missions in all, but players get to move armies around the world map to influence how things unfold.

Even the world-map is a thing of beauty. It takes the ink and parchment from the movies and brings it to life in exact detail, with a little white city of Gondor, a huge Mt. Doom spewing fire into the air and giant hawks soaring over the hills and rivers. Borrowing elements from the movies seems to have been a wholesale objective for this game. You'll hear the beautifully acted, familiar characters throughout and you'll see favourite moments re-enacted. There are huge sieges, riders of Rohan charging to the rescue, flying beasts, great heroes with pony tails and so much more.

EALA (a studio comprised of many former Westwood developers) has even gone as far as to give all of the troops emotional reactions to capture the cinematic feel of the battles. When a huge troll steps out, pulls up a tree and starts handling it like a club, you'll see the men of Gondor look at each other and start



backing away before the behemoth sweeps away the front two ranks of men who haven't quite scurried quick enough.

This game promises to be steeped in huge characters and devastating troops, from being able to summon the undead Oath Breakers, to having the Ring Wraiths on flying beasts scoop up men and horse and drop them back to earth.

The battles are all fully 3D and they are huge, with the ability to handle up to 500 units on screen at a time. Combine this with the likes of trolls, flaming catapult shots and Balrogs and you have one extravagant war.

It would seem that in all of this chaos the little emotional reactions will actually come in handy. It's really annoying to get distracted and lose half of your army to one unexpected uber-beast, for my money it's much better to have them flee and then rally around a hero who gives them a fighting chance.



Battle for Middle Earth could be breath-taking. The big question mark here is interface. We haven't heard much except that EALA is planning to do away with all of the bars at the bottom and sides of the screen and replace them with context-sensitive circular menus. That's great, but how do you keep track of your decisions? On the plus side, you have to love the idea of incredible hero units combined with rank and file that's smart enough to get out of their way.

Players will get to lead the armies of four nations – Gondor, Mordor, Isengard and Rohan – and each is a little whacky. Mordor takes the cake, though, with its endless, timed reinforcements which are limited only by population caps. Players get to choose whether to raise the cap, or buy different buildings to access fewer, but uglier troopers. Just imagine the multiplayer games!



"IF BATTLE FOR MIDDLE EARTH WAS AN ARMY... ..it'd be like Isengard's armies. It's powerful, it's bold and it's the latest technology, but it's also largely untested... especially in the control department.



Empire Earth 2

Where bigger is always better

Developer: **Mad Doc Software** Publisher: **Sierra** Distributor: **Vivendi** Due: **Early 2005**



Empire Earth covers a mere 10,000 years of history and flows through 15 distinct epochs. It offers up four distinct cultures (Middle Eastern, Western, Far Eastern and Mesoamerican) and further divides that up into 14 specific nations which will encompass twice as many units as the first game and 200-odd buildings.

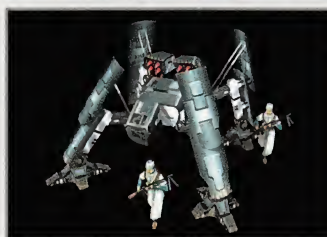
Although the game can be a sprawling real-time affair – where players go from sticks and stones right up to sci-fi – Empire Earth 2 also offers up specific Ancient Korean, Medieval German and

Modern American campaigns.

One of the criticisms of Empire Earth was that while it was huge it was a little generic, well Mad Doc is trying to fix that. Empire Earth 2 is coming to the party with several new features including dynamic weather (and weather forecasting) and a citizen manager. The manager sounds like a godsend: you can pull up a map that shows all of the resources and your workers and lets you reassign them with a couple of clicks. As an added bonus, while the map is up you can also scribble battle plans that can be sent to other players to co-ordinate attacks. These new features might not rock your world, but they sure make a lot of sense.



Empire Earth 2 is like the Chinese army, huge but does it have enough specialists to make it interesting?



Kohan: Kings of War

You don't need to get your hands dirty

Developer: **Timegate** Publisher: **Gathering** Distributor: **Take 2** Due: **Late 2004**



Kohan was a strange little RTS. It definitely moves in real-time but, in many ways, it takes a more turn-based approach to things. The game was filled with detail but you controlled things in broad strokes rather than with narrow micromanagement.

This Kohan sequel takes a similar approach and ditches a lot of the fiddly stuff so you can concentrate on your battle strategies. It seems Timegate wants players to feel more like generals and less like nannies.

Like in the first game, players

won't build units but will put together squads, mixing and matching unit types to produce the ideal fighting force. Kings of War has expanded this element of strategy by adding optional flanking positions (with a special AI) so you can pincer the enemy with some of your more interesting beasts. Players will also be able to add support units like wizards to the basic configuration for that little extra zap.

With six playable races multiplied by five political factions (which modify heroes and tech-



trees), KoW promises a bucket-load of army configurations plus some pretty neat back-story. However, micromanagement fiends might be a little put off.

Like a modern mercenary army, you get to call the shots but you don't have to sweat the details.



Rome: Total War

All Romes lead to war

Developer: **Creative Assembly** Publisher: **Activision** Distributor: **Activision** Due: **September 2004**

Out of all of the upcoming real-time strategy games, Rome Total War is probably the biggest. It combines a turn-based campaign mode for grand-scale politics, building and troop manoeuvring with an RTS component for resolving those messy little armed conflicts.

When I say "little" I'm using the mighty power of understatement as the game allows for battles featuring a cast of thousands with each participant being totally 3D, gaining individual experience and having a basic AI all of its own.

The Total War series pioneered this blended game of Risk-style manoeuvring and huge-scale RTS with both Shogun and Medieval... but Rome is where it all comes together. Now, everything on the campaign map is 3D and everything represented by the campaign maps appears where it should on the battlefield. This means you can do cool things like halting a city's production of specialty units by devastating the right targets during your real-time assault. Until the armouries and siege-works are rebuilt - costing valuable money and turns - there won't be any new defending catapults to worry about. It all ties together nicely, sort of like a cross between Sid Meier's



Civilization and the movie *Gladiator* (Sort of, indeed - Ed).

The battles are spectacular, and take the idea of dropping players into the action to a new level. With one click you zoom into the middle of the action and watch war elephants toss legionaries aside, or see Armenian scouts emerge from long grass to ambush your fragile archers. You'll see morale rise and fall as troops are broken by cinematic flanking moves or as they rally behind their generals.

All this mayhem is set between roughly 270BC and 14AD which gives us Hannibal's Carthage, Cleopatra's Egypt, angry Germans, Gauls, war elephants, screaming



The exciting thing about Rome is its scale. The battlegrounds are huge, Creative Assembly claim you'll see clashes of 10,000 troops, and there's the whole ancient world to bring to heel.

We have high hopes for this one, especially since we've managed to get some hands-on time with the RTS side of things. The controls were slick and we noticed that good tactics let us shatter large armies quickly enough to make battles flow.

berserkers and a back-stabbing senate. All up there will be twenty factions and eight fully-playable civilisations to contend with.

Three of those will be powerful Roman houses, and the game's main campaign places you at the head of one of these. Once you have conquered the known world, the game doesn't stop. Instead you have the greater challenge of conquering the other two Roman houses, which are jealous of your power, and then Rome itself. Other than the

campaign mode (which does let you play non-Romans) players can also tackle several historical scenarios or each other in free-wheeling multiplayer battles.

To help players get their heads around all this, Rome will include dynamic advisors who offer council tailored to what's going down in your game. We've only seen a touch of this from the battle-side but it seems pretty clever and it might just be what players need to forge an empire.



"IF ROME:
TOTAL WAR WAS
AN ARMY..."
... it'd be Rome at
its height: vast, well
drilled and confident. Let's
just hope it doesn't collapse
under its own weight.



Imperial Glory

The Spanish Armada is on the way

Developer: **Pyro Studios** Publisher: **Eidos** Distributor: **Atari** Due: **Early 2005**



Like the Total War games, Imperial Glory combines turn-based empire building with RTS combat. Unlike Total War, Pyro has also added real-time naval tussles and the game is set a little beyond crossbows and catapults.

Here players will be able to swamp the field with hundreds of troops from the early 19th century as the Western powers try to carve the world into neat little empires.

When you step on to the 3D battlefield you'll see deep rows of neatly-lined units moving across the field, funny hats, and lovely

plumes of smoke from the black-powder weapons.

Even better, when you set units to garrison a building, you'll see them run into structure and take cover behind the actual architecture.

Players have the choice of Great Britain, France, Russia, Prussia or Austro-Hungary as they battle across 55 provinces and 29 maritime regions. There are going to be about 70 tech advancements as well as historical quests for people who like playing through actual events from days of old.

Imperial Glory is well worth a look. It might even give Total War a run for its money except Europe circa the 1800s isn't exactly a mainstream setting.



This one is like the Swiss army; you're pretty sure it's good but you have to be pretty curious to see it fight.



Settlers V: Heritage of Kings

Are these guys too cute to fight?

Developer: **Blue Byte** Publisher: **Ubisoft** Distributor: **Ubisoft** Due: **Late 2004**



If you look around at the titles of the other games in the RTS round-up you'll notice titles like Total War, Dawn of War and Kings of War ... then you have Settlers.

It probably won't be too much of a surprise to find out that this game is a little lighter on the combat focus than you have Settlers.

One of the things that always made the Settlers titles stand out was the sense of guiding a village filled with little characters – it could even be vaguely enchanting.

Well, Settlers V is aiming for the same level of charm while

ramping up your tactical options. Players will have direct control of their soldiers now and the unit types have been expanded to include swordsmen, spearmen, bowmen, cavalry, artillery and heroes. In Settlers fashion you still have to build a barracks, which then allows you to recruit leaders who in turn go out and recruit the actual troops.

Even with the added firepower Blue Byte says that game's 20 dynamic scenarios allow players to win in many ways and only a couple of them require brute force.



Settlers V is kind of like the French army, it looks good, is charming, & even has weapons, but it's not really about gritty warfare.



Warhammer 40K: Dawn of War

These miniatures don't require painting

Developer: Relic Publisher: THQ Distributor: THQ Due: October 2004

Welcome to the only RTS on our list that isn't set in bygone days. Instead it's set about 40,000 years into the future and brings to life the scorch-mark black future of Games Workshop's popular table-top game, Warhammer 40K. And Relic's take on the 40K is shaping up to being one of the most eye-candy filled RTS events ever seen.

While the armies of 80 to 150 units are dwarfed by the likes of Rome and Imperial Glory, Dawn of War goes nuts on the battle animations and special effects. All up, each unit will pack around 100 animations and the hand-to-hand battles promise scenes of characters plunging their swords into foes and then pushing them free with an armoured boot, or finishing blows that send enemies twisting away like something from a kung-fu flick.

With the ferocity of the battles it's no surprise Dawn of War isn't going to take time out to collect wood. In fact, the only resources are



strategic points that earn you additional fuel (for your field camps) and reinforcements. Relic is keeping quiet on the details but if Dawn borrows any of the table-top game's army-buying system, these areas generate points that let you order new troops, equipment and technology. Keeping in the spirit of the original game, players will be able to outfit their basic troops with a variety of wargear as well as adding commanders and heroes to squads to bump up their staying power. Just to make infantry miserable, there will also be lumbering warmachines, psykers, chaos demons, tanks and bloody-handed gods clogging up the battlefield and dismembering units.

The game will feature roughly twelve missions which follow the fortunes of Space Marine Commander Gabriel who is ordered to protect a planet from invading Orks. Naturally things get complicated really fast.



The Warhammer 40K world is incredibly complex and rich, featuring 3D gaming mechanics refined for well-over a decade. Capturing this fullness has always thrown game developers but it looks like Relic is really giving this game a good shake by focusing on the ferocity of the battles and leveraging the outstanding unit design. It's a pity that we don't have a better idea of the reinforcement system, but the controls and interface are looking fairly dependable.

The big four armies are available in Dawn of War – Space Marines, Orks, Eldar and Chaos – which cover the bases of balance, numbers, subtlety and strength. It's obvious that Relic is really trying to keep as much from the table-top game as possible, from including

favourite specialty units like Death Jesters and Terminator Marines to allowing people to re-create the look of their painted 40K army. You'll be able assign up to four colours to pre-set colour zones, as well as being able to choose an insignia for banners or badges.

Having a distinctive army is probably going to be a good thing since Relic is promising a strong multiplayer element with talk of 10 to 12 head-to-head modes. Space Hulk step aside, computerised 40K is getting a new face.



"IF DAWN OF WAR WAS AN ARMY...
...it'd be a 19th century Samurai army... full of culture, with beautiful arms and armour, and boasting great finishing moves, but just how practical are these distinguishing features?"



The 10[□] Commandments of Strategy Design



When the Xbox was finally released in early 2002, it seemed a time for despair. Here, at last, was a console with graphics as good as a PC, that more or less was a PC, playing games that should have come out for PC first.

But there was still hope, still one massive area of PC gaming that console could never hope to touch - strategy.

No one, nowhere does strategy as good as it is done on PC. Not for the strategy-head is the lone gunman against the demon hordes. No, instead, the strategy-head wants to BE the demon

hordes, and the hordier the better. From massive, sprawling epics to tight, claustrophobic squad-based pick-through-the-ruins-of-a-colonial-outpost fests, strategy is the PC's forte.

What other genre can still pump out 2D sprite-based games and expect to make money? What other genre can demand the player micromanage such esoterica as troop morale and rice production?

Of course, like any genre, there are the greats and there are the not-so-greats. There are Warcraft 3s, and there

are Missions Humanity. There are also Heists and Laser Squads Nemesis. While there are far fewer crappy strategy games than there are crappy FPSs, we're not entirely comfortable that the horror days of the RTS clone won't rise again and threaten to trample us all.

Here then, is our advice to strategy designers - both realtime and turn-based - out there in developer-land. We're not saying the genre is in bad shape. But we are saying that no one should start getting complacent. That way lies Dominion: Storm Over Gift 3.

THOU SHALT NOT...

1

Do another 'Cowboys and Indians in space' sci-fi schlock-fest.

Sure, that was Dark Reign's actual brief from publishers Activision, but that's no excuse for everyone to knock up a dodgy sci-fi premise, draw a few tanks that look like cockroaches, add some line-of-sight bonuses and call it a game. Frontier sci-fi is the WW2 shooter of strategy design, and it needs to be stamped out.

And like WW2, it seems less like a cogent design choice and more like researcher laziness. Why figure out how tanks should perform if you can just make up your own? Don't do it.



2

Create an RTS based on an earlier non-strategy game or a movie.

You may think that because EverQuest has several hundred thousand online addicts it will necessarily sell twice that many units of the RTS version. Letting people play with their favourite characters in a different genre displays the same kind of thinking as those awful kitsch Simpsons chess sets. Will Star Trek fans necessarily want a Star Trek RTS? New Worlds sank without a trace. And everyone seems to have agreed to never mention the War of the Ring ever again. Except us.



3

Go mad with line of sight, elevation, terrain and weather modifiers.

Honestly, you might think this is 'realistic' but it just gets in the way of the game. We want to be challenged by enemy AI, by limited unit resources, by the very nature of the scenario. Not by a forest and a couple of hills. We don't want to find our armoured column stuck in the mud after the random number generator rolls a four and makes it rain. And we most certainly do not want to be crossing a frozen lake and have the sun come out and melt the ice in six seconds, drowning half our force. That ain't clever design.



THOU OBVIOUSLY SHALL...

- 1 Provide a manual with detailed unit descriptions.
- 2 Give us a hotkey to centre your crappy 3D camera on our selected unit.
- 3 Make units actually big enough to see.
- 4 Understand water effects and pixel shaders ain't strategic.
- 5 Let us disable the use of superweapons in multiplayer games.
- 6 Give us variable tech levels, like in the good old days.
- 7 Include an in-game encyclopaedia for ultra-detailed historical games.
- 8 Let us hack.ini files to give us infinite cash & short build times.
- 9 Allow us to gloat over our victory for at least five seconds before you close the map.
- 10 Penalise the hell out of people who disconnect from online multiplayer games.

THOU SHALT...

1

Just like in FPS, make at least a cursory attempt to give your game a setting we haven't all played a dozen times before.

New tanks don't a new game make, but for some reason strategy seems to push the envelope even less than FPS; there's your sci-fi strategy, your fantasy strategy, your WW2 strategy. Come on guys! There are heaps of other good ideas out there! Fallout Tactics took a step in the right direction (though it broke THOU SHALT NOT Commandment 2) with its post-apocalyptic squad-based battlin'. How about a street gang RTS? Or a modern US-military turn-based game?



2

Look beyond the video store for more suitable strategy properties.

There is tonnes of stuff out there. Apart from the length and breadth of military history, there's also a rich body of literary work that just begs a strategy game or two. How about a tense galactic 4X game set in Asimov's Foundation universe? Human versus <otie conflict from Niven and Pournelle's definitive The Mote in God's Eye? Awesome rail battles in Sean McMullen's Greatwinter universe? Someone pay some starving writer a half-decent licensing fee and get on with it!



3

Figure out how to make the scenario genuinely challenging.

Clever designers like the boys at Westwood know how to precisely position enemy SAM emplacements to make blowing them all up just hard enough. They know that two Humvees guarding an outpost will make all the difference from one. They don't just create a spawn point and have billions of enemy units swamp us in the first forty seconds of play. In short, we want to feel like we're playing a scenario, not a big electronic pair of dice that win whenever they roll a double six.



THOU SHALT NOT...

4

Make our units explode, lock up, run away or fail a morale check. This ties in to Commandment 3. In other words, ditch the random crap, okay? If we lose, we want to know that we could have won had we only made a couple of different decisions. We don't want our Dwarven Cannons to fail a reliability check and blow up. Leave that for the tabletop, where random events are needed to make the experience seem more real. This is the PC. We have animation, sound, lighting. Use them, instead of virtual dice rolls.



5

Say "rock-paper-scissors is complex enough for our combat model, thanks very much."

This is barely better than random, knowing that you have to make a guess against the enemy's strategy that has only a 33% chance of success. Of course, at the most basic level most unit-on-unit encounters will have some kind of rock-paper-scissors style look-up table to make it possible for players to know which units to send against which others. But it should be complicated as much as possible. Units should be able to be upgraded to reduce their vulnerability to other units. China's Overlord tank in C&C Generals is an excellent example of this, with the ability to build chain guns and speaker towers on its turret.



6

Provide a skirmish mode and then an AI player that always builds its base in exactly the same pattern no matter what difficulty it's set on. Frankly, if people can programme bots to fight humans across the many vagaries of an FPS map, it should be possible to create a strategy AI that's hard to predict.

Good games like Ground Control 2 have different AI personalities so

you can get some idea what you're up against, but also know that things won't always be the same. And while we're on the subject, can someone please explain why a "medium" army is so easy while a "hard" army is exponentially more impossible?



THOU SHALT...

4

Hire a mathematical savant to figure out your pathfinding code.

There is nothing on this great grey Earth more irritating than telling a soldier to go round the back of an advancing squad to snipe from a watchtower only to have him run merrily through the middle of the enemy and what's more refuse to shoot back because he has a move command.

We can only presume the problem specification here is untenably massive because no one seems to have got it entirely right yet. There's nothing like having to give up on an entire squad of units because you accidentally clicked on the wrong part of the map.



5

Endeavour to include quite a lot of units for each side.

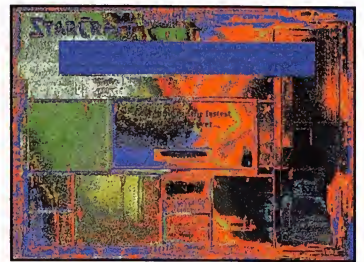
When we pay \$100 for a game we want more than eight units each. Sure, you as a developer want each of your precious babies to be equally important in each and every battle but here's a news flash: we'll decide how we want to play. Give us 20 units and let us use our favourites and ignore our not favourites. Don't make the ugly Goliath or the micromangement-intensive spellcasting Templar vital to victory. Take a leaf from Warhammer's many books and let players express themselves with their armies.



6

Provide a free online, in game multiplayer matching service.

Battle.net is, without overstatement, the greatest thing in the universe. Blizzard's brainwave to make multiplayer game matching actually part of the game interface was nothing short of brilliant. Obvious, but brilliant. I'm sorry if you're a tiny struggling company, surely there's enough open source peer-to-peer network stuff out there now to make it possible for you to create a multiplayer arena that doesn't need a central server.



THOU OBVIOUSLY SHALT NOT...

- 1 Make another Star Wars strategy game. Please, have mercy.
- 2 Omit the ability to save in mid-mission.
- 3 Allow yourself to be convinced mud is an interesting terrain type.
- 4 Expect us to have studied WW2 before playing your WW2 strategy game.
- 5 Think we care about ballistics modelling and wind shear.
- 6 Let micromangement make up for a lack of AI.
- 7 Let crappy AI take the place of micromangement.
- 8 Think yet another sci-fi strategy game could possibly "redefine" anything.
- 9 Try to improve on the tried-and-tested right-click interface
- 10 Admit you had anything to do with Mission Humanity.

THOU SHALT NOT...

7

Create tanks with main guns that do hardly any damage to infantry. Honestly, EVERYONE does this. And yes, we understand what you're modelling: a small person's ability to dodge a lumbering tank's turret. But surely there's a more sophisticated way of doing it beyond just having a tiny little person stand in front of a tank thumbing his nose as gigantic explosive shells take 5% off his hit points each shot. Westwood and others have begun to make this modelling more sophisticated with specific anti-infantry tank units such as flamers and chain-gun tanks, but it's still irritating.



8

Be a slave to realism. This applies to every genre of course but it's particularly apt in RTS, and developers who refuse, rightly, to give in to the realism beast should actually be forgiven for breaking commandments like number 7. This is of course why tanks can't instantly kill a building full of garrisoned units. If they could, there'd be no point garrisoning anything. Being able to squash infantry is cool, as first seen in the venerable Dune 2, but having to maintain tedious and uninteresting supply lines and move supply units to fill fuel tanks and ammo, as seen in Battle Isle 2 is not.



9

Balance everything so amazingly precisely that it becomes impossible to win. You may just love spending hours and hours probing at your opponent to find one tiny little weak spot thus allowing you to rush him while he isn't looking, but most actual real gamers aren't in to that tedious crap. We want a good chance of being able to beat an opponent, especially if they're a little slower to grab all the resource points on a map. In other words, if our opponent is not a good player, we don't want some wishy-washy yin-yang system (*cough* Battle Realms *cough*) to give him a second chance. And a third chance. And a fourth chance. Snore.



10

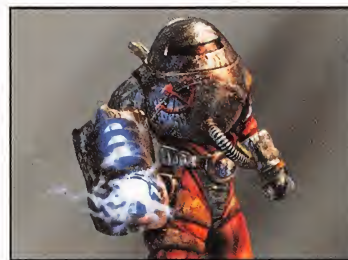
Expect players to invest more than two hours in a single map. You may think that giving them four hundred units to manage and a thousand turns to conquer an entire continent to be excitingly epic, but honestly we'd prefer our gaming in friendlier-sized chunks. We're keen to fling a good fifty units around for an hour or so, but any more and clicking on one after the other becomes really, really dull. In any case, ask yourself if your really big maps are one battle or just five battles going on all at once? Thought so.



THOU SHALT...

7

Continue to figure out clever ways to keep infantry useful in a genre dominated by tanks. Take pride in your little guys! Make them look cool, give them cool guns, make players WANT to use them instead of big ugly tanks. Give them special abilities like being able to capture other units and buildings, a-la Battle Isle 3. Make them heroes that are key to winning scenarios. Work them! When building garrisoning came in to RTS, it was like a new dawn had risen for infantry. I can't wait to see what they'll be doing at lunchtime.



8

Give the player access to all the niggly stats they want. Strategy gamers love knowing the hit points of unit X, before and after its third armour upgrade. We love going to little corner pubs and discussing the merits of artillery units against charging cavalry with morale bonuses. In almost no other genre except RPG can you the developer enjoy fans of this calibre, so make sure we don't have to actually hack an .ini file to get all this nerdly information we so desperately crave.



9

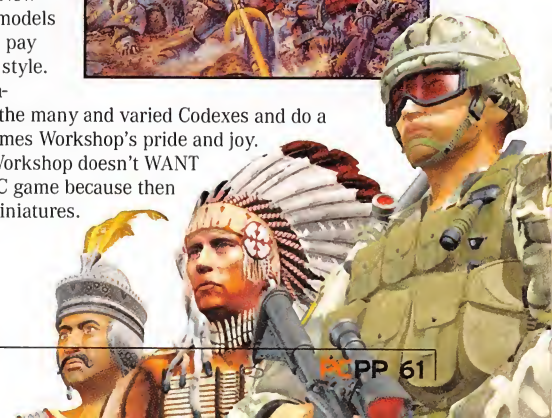
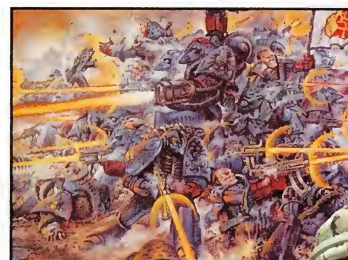
Spend at least a couple of months checking and triple checking if your interface actually works. This is no FPS, where we can just remap a few keys to make it just right. A mouse-invert here won't save us. The biggest offender? Games where you can only deselect a unit by clicking on another unit. I want a right-click interface, where a left-click on empty space deselects whatever I had just been using. Otherwise, I find my peons wandering off into a nest of berserkers. Nasty.



10

Create a Warhammer and Warhammer 40K game that actually replicates the experience of the tabletop version.

I mean really, this just seems so obvious. Ultra-detailed, customisable units to help you create a personalised army. New unit downloads. Hell, if the models are detailed enough I'll even pay 99c for my new Ork, iTunes style. Grab the ultra-detailed, ultra-refined rules straight out of the many and varied Codexes and do a Neverwinter Nights with Games Workshop's pride and joy. Wait... I see it now. Games Workshop doesn't WANT a really good Warhammer PC game because then people would stop buying miniatures. Is that it?



EXTENDED PLAY

FREE PLAY 2004

Melbourne, Victoria, Australia



TRAVEL LOG

By Harvey Smith

Recently, I was invited to participate in Free Play, an Australian indie games conference. Since I just resigned from Ion Storm 6 weeks ago, in order to pursue my schemes related to starting an independent game studio, and I had just coincidentally started a rant-on-paper about the independent creative spirit driving so much of what I love about games, this seemed like fate or something. I decided to go to the conference, despite my insanely busy schedule, despite the fact that I had just returned from E3 2004 only days earlier and despite the *loong* flight down under and the jetlag, in order to speak on a subject outside my normal game design comfort zone: inspiration.

ARRIVAL DAY ►►

Just prior to the last 3 trips I've taken—Montreal, LA and

Melbourne—I've played in late night D&D games with my long-running campaign group, which consists of designers from Thief 3 and the Deus Ex games. I do this to knock myself out on the following morning's plane ride. So, since I slept most of the way, the flight to Australia was fine; not nearly as bad as I had dreaded. By the time I awoke, we had only 5-6 hours to go. None of the nearby babies behaved too badly. I had an aisle seat and no one sat next to me. I slept, played Tetris for hours (...it was built into the plane seat in front of me), and watched the last half of a movie called "Something's Gotta Give." (Warning—avoid this movie unless it turns you on to watch 60-year-olds make out like dry, slow-moving lizards.)

I arrived at the airport at 10am and went through immigration. A pair of cute dogs—a beagle and a lab—searched me for drugs or illegal fruit. Someone immediately took my passport away for a while due to "some problem with my middle name." He brought it back within minutes and I passed through to the next part of the airport.

My bag finally showed up on the luggage claim conveyor—unlike my recent trip to Germany, when my bags went to wrong city. I was worried my luggage was once again doomed because the international part of LAX (Tom Bradley) seemed to be run by 100 slackers, none of whom spoke the same language. (When I dropped my bag off, they

scanned it, tagged it and handed it off to someone who walked it into a small office nearby. I wondered: How can this be their routine process for getting bags to Australia?)

Outside in the airport lobby, Binh picked me out of the crowd. I'd never met him, but had been told by email that he would find me. ("We have organised the conference assistant, Binh Nguyen to collect you at the airport. Binh is Vietnamese Australian, about 25, so keep an eye out for him at the gate.") Binh was with a friend who was holding an ice pack to his face; he had a huge swollen spot next to one of his eyes, and claimed to have walked into a pole. I picked up a cup of coffee at a nearby counter—after struggling to order, since I had no idea what "white coffee" was—and we headed off in Binh's car. He and his friend were smart and fun; we chattered and laughed most of the way to downtown Melbourne. (When I said "downtown," they were both confused. Apparently, they say, "CBD," for Central Business District. But after a second they knew what I





PLEASE LABEL YOUR BAGGAGE BOTH INSIDE AND OUTSIDE AND LOCK IT.

meant, claiming to have only heard the expression "downtown" on the TV show, *The Simpsons*. Go, American culture.)

We drove for half an hour to the conference. This was the first year for Free Play. Some of the developers in Melbourne are very indie in nature. They're just talking about getting an IGDA chapter off the ground. So it was a really cool time to come in contact with them. I met Fiona, who had brought me over, and several other cool people, including Katherine, Casey (the tech director for the conference), and David (from Tantalus), the driving force behind the upcoming Melbourne IGDA chapter.

The keynote speech—which I was scheduled to give at 6pm—was to be held in a dojo, which I liked a lot. (There was actually a framed photo on the wall of a screaming Australian martial artist getting poked hard in the eye.) By this point, I was running on fumes. The conference got under way, in a super casual "set up the stage audio stuff as the speakers are talking" fashion. Looking around, I saw a bunch of people who were there to do a good thing because they were having fun, because they wanted to, not because they were being paid a lot of money to do it. It was really

refreshing, in contrast with the energy-charged, but impersonal, mass-spawning-waters experience of E3, which I'd attended less than a week earlier.

After the conference got under way, Fiona recommended that I head to the hotel for a shower and a nap. (I was looking even more bedraggled than usual, apparently.)

The cab ride to the Ibis hotel was

to rest for one day before speaking, as is the usual custom in the tech-culture-conference world.)

I walked for blocks, checking out 3 Internet cafes. None of them would let me plug my laptop in; they would only let me use their computers. Since, before leaving the US, I had left a world of intriguing business and game studio developments in a whirl at my back,

the head, so I took another shower.

I had a taxi drop me at the Free Play conference dojo and prepared for my speech. I'm not sure how many people were there, but I was told it was a couple of hundred. Who knows... This was my first speech that wasn't specifically about game design. It was all about inspiration and hanging on to the spirit of creative independence in the modern game development climate. Everyone I talked to seemed to like it, but then again the Australians seem like very polite people to me. So, again, who knows. I enjoyed delivering the talk, one way or another.

I hung around after the speech and the conference slowly transitioned into a party. I didn't have a drink (just because I didn't feel like it, in my exhausted state), but everyone around me started getting sloshed. I spent 5 minutes with one group, 10 with another, moving around and meeting as many people as I could.

One of the best conversations I had was with a guy who had been called "insane" at an earlier session for asking whether interactive media might someday be more culturally relevant than film. I opened my laptop and showed him a rant I had written earlier in the week on the exact same subject, sharing his viewpoint. This gave him a feeling of vindication, I think. He was smart and passionate.

A guy had been called insane for asking whether interactive media might someday be more culturally relevant than film

cheap and the driver was friendly. He'd moved to Melbourne in 1957, years before—in his vernacular—I was a wicked grin on my mother's face.

At the Ibis, my plans were dashed. I couldn't check in until 2pm, something like 4 hours later. I couldn't buy Australian cash with my plastic, so I was only able to get enough for a locker. I dumped my baggage into the locker, and then went into the lobby to use the Internet. However, both terminals were down. The Ibis is cool, but it's not the W, I learned. I trekked out into the streets, starving and exhausted, looking for food and connectivity.

It was looking more and more like I would have to give my speech un-showered and un-rested. (Before arriving, I assumed that I'd be able

I really wanted Internet access.

At one of the Internet cafes, the attendant was also a vegetarian. She recommended a place to eat called SushiMax, which was good. Starving, I ate too much, probably to kill time and busy my anxious self.

My laptop batteries were fading away as my own biological batteries were doing the same. I had tweaked my speech on the flight (of course), so I copied it to a USB keychain fob just in case. (I suddenly wondered: How can the GBA have so little memory when this tiny keychain fob holds hundreds of megs?)

Back at the Ibis, they finally let me check in. I took a shower and—after lying in bed for a long while, fighting jetlag—managed to get an hour of actual sleep. When I woke up, I felt like a donkey had kicked me in

EXTENDED PLAY



At some point, the party transitioned from the games group to the film group; within an hour, the room had a much higher ratio of hip haircuts, attractive women and (I kid you not) men in fur coats, Tyler Durdan style. It was increasingly difficult to hear the drunk people talk over the obnoxiously loud DJs. Wanting to go back to my room, I finally walked out with a group of developers—with whom I had spent the last half hour talking—and said goodnight, flagging a taxi.

This cab driver was a serious racist, explaining to me how his favorite hate group controlled the world's economies. Last time I'd head this rant from a cabbie, I was in LA, several years back.

At the hotel room, I tried to call back to the States, but failed to figure out how. Feeling totally frustrated by technology and totally cut off from my life, I fell asleep, exhausted.

SECOND DAY ►►

When I woke up at 7am, I was experiencing a terrible caffeine-deprivation headache, recognisable across all cultures (and eras, I assume) by coffee drinkers. My body—due to the time change—had expected a heavy dose of caffeine at 4pm the evening prior.



Staggering like a zombie, I made my way down to breakfast without showering...that's how bad I felt. An hour after having coffee and breakfast, I was back to normal.

At the conference, a company called Nocturnal had sponsored a breakfast. I briefly talked again to Casey—the conference tech director, who was an expatriated American from Chicago—and then I went to fetch us both some more coffee half a block away at a deli.

The deli was small, but friendly. As the woman behind the counter made us two coffees ("tall, black," as Casey had described them, using the Aussie vernacular), I listened to a man and woman at a nearby table

mod community works. I'd bet a lot of the problems have already been experienced (and often solved) by mod makers.

I wanted to corner Damien Scott for a chat, but never got the chance.

An hour later, I sat on a panel moderated by an art curator and designer named Rebecca. Also on the panel were Brody Condon, an innovative interactive artist from C-Level, and Ian Bell, who had co-created the classic game *Elite*.

The panel was on politics in games. It was inspiring and humbling at the same time. Inspiring, because it's cool that people like Rebecca, Brody and Ian have put so much thought into

Listening to them made me wonder, once again, as to the exact definition of a mod. (Was Deus Ex an Unreal mod?)

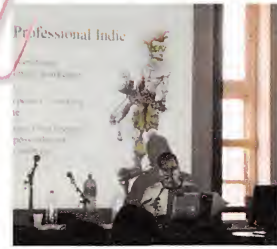
talk excitedly about 3D graphics-related math; Free Play spillover, no doubt.

Back at the conference, I talked to some more evocative people, including a media-arts guy named Adam, who had filmed my keynote speech and planned to show it later in the month to a bunch of students. (Very cool—normally only the privileged people at a given studio or school get to attend conferences.) Adam also had an exhibit showing (the following day) at the conference.

I listened to a speech given by Damien Scott, the game designer and mod community advocate who had created *Team Fortress*. Nice talk—he and his partner seemed like smart, fun people. Listening to them made me wonder, once again, as to the exact definition of a mod developer. (Was *Deus Ex* an Unreal mod?) Several things they said resonated with me; in ways, the distributed development some more mainstream developers are starting to employ resembles the way the

activism. Humbling, because games like *Deus Ex* only barely scratch the surface of dealing with thematic issues like violence or gender politics in games, and really I am much less thoughtful about politics than a bunch of the game developers I know. Ian Bell, for instance, was a fountainhead of mindful comments about how games carry political messages whether intentional or not. (It struck me that if Bell and Will Wright ever end up in the same room for more than an hour, the world itself might instantly change in some good way.)

At some point during the panel, a person named "Kipper" was piped in through virtual chat with speech synthesis 'reading' the chat log. This was fairly interesting in and of itself, but apparently Kipper is someone associated with a very impressive political game project called *Escape from Woomera*. Prior, I had no idea there was this big point of contention over the unethical treatment of refugees in Australia. (It sounds horrible, and



just goes to show how unethical behavior on the part of governments and law enforcement is a potential danger everywhere.)

After the panel, a group of around 7 people approached me and said they'd heard from friends that my keynote was good. They wondered if I could cover the high points. Instead, I offered to give the speech again, at some nearby restaurant of their choosing. We all took a long walk back to the hotel so I could grab my laptop. (Along the way, I stopped once to get more coffee, at Starbuck's no less, and again to browse the D20 section of an Australian RPG store. The guy working behind the counter looked just like Andrew Leker, co-designer of Oasis.)

At the hotel, I gave my talk again for this small group, downstairs in the hotel bistro. They drank orange and pineapple juice, while eating potato wedges and listening. Afterward, we hung out and talked for another hour. Some of them in the group were developers and some of them were students. One of them fondly mentioned that two years earlier—Doug Church had come to Australia and had given a meaningful talk at a development conference. One of them, Mark, had developed MS and had lost the ability to walk a couple of years earlier; he had not given up on his game development dreams, though, and talked passionate about his future plans. Game culture people never cease to amaze me. Eventually, I bowed out and returned to my room for a while.

At 8.30pm, I met some of the conference people at Lebanese House, a restaurant. Dinner was great; we talked about games and world politics which are, at the

moment, the dog's breakfast, as some of the Aussies might say. I sat next to Katherine and Fiona, from the conference, and Ian Bell (who is also a vegetarian).

Afterward, Ian and I went out for a beer with Brody and Ian Shanahan, a mod developer who had worked with Kieron Gillen on the Deus Ex mod called The Cassandra Project. We walked seemingly forever, just to find something resembling a bar. (Discos were everywhere; quiet pubs were rare.) We finally rested at the oddly-named Spaghetti Tree and ordered drinks.

For me, this conversation was great: Ian Bell (a veteran game developer whose game Elite touched many of people I know, putting a permanent watermark on their memories), Brody Condon (a world class interactive artist, who boldly works on projects like Waco

Resurrection), and Ian Shanahan (an exceptional mod game designer and a really fun, smart guy). I would nerd out with one of them about games, only to have someone else at the table pull us hard in the direction of art or political message, then we'd drift back toward talking about gamer-thrilling features that wanted to eventually see in games.

This conversation was essentially a commercial for the value of having a diverse game culture. We talked a lot about what game designers, mod makers and artists might be able to do in the next two rounds of games, using some of the Ken Perlin-style emotive animation tech. (We really wanted to use this same stuff for Deus Ex: Invisible War, before our total mismanagement of the technology we were creating ate our freaking lunch and cost us a bunch of our game features, aesthetic goals and polish.)

THIRD DAY ►►

In keeping with my jetlag trend, I had breakfast at dawn while reading the local papers and working on my laptop. The sunrises in Australia are beautiful.

Later, I walked 15 minutes to the conference and listened to a panel while eating an Aussie doughnut. I also went to an art-interactive installation called Faux CAVE, hosted by Adam Neykoff-Davies. Mostly, though, I just hung out on Day Three and chatted with gamers and developers, non-stop. Ian Shanahan is full of great ideas and is recovering his passion quickly, I

think, after pouring himself into shipping the first episode of the Cassandra Project. I met lots of artists, designers and technologists who were full of good will and great ideas, confirming my finding that Melbourne really has major potential as a centre for game development; many different energies in one place.

Later, after the last panel/speech, we moved all the chairs out of the way and started setting up for an expo of demos and games. (Half-jokingly referred to as "E3.1b.") Around this time, I almost single-handedly demolished a snack tray—being ravenous, due to missing lunch—fully conscious that I must look like a pig to nearby Fiona Maxwell, leader of the brains and muscle team behind Free Play. By the time evening rolled around, I was wiped out. After many more conversations, I headed back to the hotel for a "nap." But of course I was unconscious until 4am, so I missed the last night's activities entirely.

CONCLUSION ►►

As the games/interactive branch of Next Wave, Free Play is an interesting and meaningful conference. It feels like a stripped-down GDC seen through the lens of DIY independence. I had a great time and I appreciate the invitation to contribute.

I met students, developers, modders, organizers and artists...enough to convince me that Melbourne has a thriving game dev culture. Hopefully, an IGDA chapter will be forming there soon. I saw no kangaroos, crocodiles or koala bears...just a very livable city and bunch of fascinating people expressing themselves through interactive media.

Harvey Smith is a veteran game designer who, having been Lead Designer on Deus Ex and Project Lead on Invisible War, recently left Ion Storm to start his own development studio. He lives in Austin, Texas.



GAMES IN REVIEW

D OOM 3, eh? The Next Month page from last issue betrays the fact we did not expect to reviewing DOOM 3 in this issue. When both the developer and publisher of the game only ever answer "When it's done" in response to our queries regarding a release date, it makes it difficult to plan such reviews in advance. Four weeks ago, when we sent PCPP#102 to print, we literally had no idea we would be reviewing DOOM 3 in these very pages.

But then something remarkable happened. Activision contacted us and said, "It's nearly done".

I say nearly because, as I write this on deadline, we haven't received the final code. Indeed, I haven't even played the game yet. But I will be playing it tomorrow, the day after deadline, and all the following weekend - which, as I'm sure you can imagine, makes writing this little editorial piece a trifle problematic. It's tough to introduce the game reviews section when you haven't played the biggest game of the issue.

You see, to give you an insight into the production process, we need to send our pages to print several weeks prior to our on sale date. This time period then allows for the actual printing and binding of the magazine, the production and inserting of our coverdiscs, the distribution and circulation around the country, and crucially the fixing of any errors we may have made.

We couldn't let our DOOM 3 review slip to the next issue, since that would have left us running nearly four weeks behind its




release. So what we're planning to do is send the mag to print now, but in a week's time say, "Whoops! There are errors on pages 70 to 75!" Then we'll be able to pull a switcheroo and sneak our DOOM 3 review in.

Hey, the mag's only finished when we say "When it's done"...

David Wildgoose
Editor

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GOLD AWARD	HIGH DISTINCTION	DISTINCTION	CREDIT	PASS	FAIL
The ultimate accolade. A game that receives a Gold Award is an essential purchase, and the only excuse for not owning it is either not having a powerful enough PC, or not having a PC at all. Or arms. It represents a new direction in gaming, a new benchmark against which all others will be measured. It defines its genre, or creates a new one. It is gaming. You must own it.	This is the finest in gaming. A fresh concept, a perfect execution, a meaningful extension to a tried and tested format, one or all of these are required for this score. We strongly recommend the purchase of each High Distinction game, but extremely fussy gamers may want to skip those HD games that don't also receive Gold Awards.	An intriguing new concept or a bold new direction that manages to pull its new trick off with a reasonable degree of flair. You will be impressed, at either the graphics, the gameplay or some other new element that you may not have encountered before. Or perhaps this is a familiar gaming concept, but one executed so well it's almost - but not quite - an essential purchase.	Solid, playable, largely bug-free, entertaining and maybe even a bit unexpected, these are the hallmarks of a game of Credit. You may have seen it all before, but you won't mind, because a Credit game does what it says on the box - it plays well and it keeps you hooked. An essential purchase? Not necessarily, but worth consideration.	A game that receives a pass is playable, but its concept may be flawed, its extras may be lacking or its graphical enhancements may have fallen off somewhere in a lengthy bug-fixing process. And bugs there may be, although in the end the game will, as we say, work. Purchase if you're curious, but discerning gamers will probably look for something more substantial.	There are more than 5000 games released each year. Some are gems. Some are merely unremarkable. Others are nothing more than a shameless grab for cash. Graphics will be rudimentary and gameplay will be worse. If you see someone considering a game that has failed, gently take them by the elbow and hurl them out of the shop. It's your duty as a good citizen.
90+	85-100	75-84	65-74	50-64	0-49



Joint Operations Typhoon Rising

For those who want a bigger Battlefield



Developer: Novalogic ■ Publisher: Electronic Arts ■ Distributor: Electronic Arts ■ Rating: MA15+ ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Available: Now

Joint Operations is a big game. Literally. Not since Operation Flashpoint or Planetside have we seen such massive levels. The developer claims that the largest maps are a leg-straining sixty four square kilometres; all I know is that I feel like a tiny pimple on the back of an elephant's ass when playing this game. The ability to see up to 1km in any direction (depending on the weather conditions) makes it apparent just how far you must travel to the next capture point. It makes Battlefield look tiny.

In fact, at times the maps can seem a little too big. If the server doesn't have fifty players or more, you'll spend several

The largest maps are a leg-straining sixty four square kilometres; all I know is that I feel like a tiny pimple on the back of an elephant's ass

boring minutes chewing your fingernails as you head to the front line. At least this doesn't happen too often, as the game supports up to one hundred and fifty players. This means there's always bound to be some sneaky bugger sniping your main base, pissing off all the guys who believe spawn camping is akin to urinating on their mother's grave.

That's a lot of people

Not all games support one hundred and fifty players, as the server requirements are high, but Novalogic claims that community servers should be able to handle sixty four players without breaking a sweat. Thankfully Novalogic is considering hosting several Aussie servers, so we should get the full experience without the burden of the dreaded lag monster. Unfortunately the ratio of smacktard to gamer increases as the player numbers rise, but it's pretty easy to boot these vehicle-camping gits from the game thanks to the voting tools.

There are around six different player classes, with a wide range of cool player models to choose from. Our own Australian SAS troops are included, but look incredibly poxy when standing next

to the US Delta Force models.

Instead of the scabby ten or so maps we're used to when playing an online shooter, Novalogic has taken a page out of UT2K4's lengthy epic and given us a stack of playgrounds to run amok in. Thirty one of them in fact. These cover a whole range of locations, in the same way that the original Model T ford covered a whole range of colours; there's jungle, jungle or jungle. Actually, that's not being fair. While all of the environments are filled with ferns, rivers and croaking frogs just waiting to be detonated by high explosives, with nary an Antarctic or desert setting to be seen, the actual landscapes vary wildly. Some of the maps are a sniper's delight, with mountains looking down over vast plains, while others are designed for flanking and manoeuvring, consisting of small hills and valleys.

Predator is your daddy

Considering the vast maps and long draw distance, it's astonishing at how much detail is presented. It's often breathtaking, and always impressive. Sure, you'll need a computer from the International Space Station to run

CLAN AUS- THE GENEROUS CLAN

Massive thanks to Clan AUS (www.jo.aus-squad.com) for hosting a server for our tests. These guys pay several hundred bucks a month to give Aussie JO players a place to call hell. Legends.



SYSTEM

NEED

1.2GHz CPU
256MB RAM
32MB DX9 AGP
Videocard
(HW T&L req)
1.5GB HDD
56k modem

WANT

Athlon 64 3400+
RADEON X800 Pro
1GB DDR400
512kbps broadband

MULTIPLAYER

150 players!

ONLINE

www.petitiononline.com/thypeont/
Head over here to sign up for a very badly worded petition demanding the release of a dedicated server for JO. At least their heart is in the right place.



1.) Find a nice sniping spot



2.) Get the range



3.) Kill people



everything on its highest settings (it brought an Athlon 64 3400+ with X800XT to its knees with all details cranked to their highest). Even on medium settings this game demands an uber computer. It uses a similar foliage system to Battlefield: Vietnam, with magical grass that insta-grows once you're within a certain range of it. If you read my BF:V review a few months back you know that the grass in BF:V needs a healthy dose of Agent Orange, because long range enemies can still see you while you think you're sneakily hidden away.

Thank the gods of blowing stuff up - Joint Ops fixes this problem via a very simple yet clever approach.

If you're lying in grass, the texture of your character matches the texture you're lying on, in a way that would bring a tear to the Predator's crab-like eyes. This makes it very hard for enemies at long range to spot you while you're lying down in a grassy area. It even works when you're crouching, changing the lower half of your character.

This simple solution works perfectly, and makes going prone in long grass worthwhile at last. However, it does promote "camping", but we prefer to refer to it as "digging in", as we're not playing Quake 3 any more Dorothy. If only more JO players would accept this...

WHO THE CRAP SHOT ME?

What do you get when you combine a 1km viewing distance with grass that truly hides the player? Snipersville USA, population: half of your team! Never has sniping been so much fun, which probably explains why so many players choose this class. This results in the non-snipers whining and moaning about how there are so many snipers, but there's a simple solution - hunt them down and slit their sniping throat from ear to ear!

Driving Miss Daisy-cutter

Any recent first-person shooter worth its weight in bullets must have drivable vehicles, so it's no surprise to see that Joint Ops includes a healthy bunch. As well as the standard transport and attack choppers, there's a nice selection of APCs, jeeps, FAVs (fast attack vehicles) and enough boats to make Popeye proud. By far the coolest are the little rubber dinghies, which lend the game an authentic SAS feel.

Unfortunately there are a couple of issues with the vehicles. While the control systems are simple enough for even the most uncoordinated chimp (including the choppers), the physics seem very simple

compared to the Battlefield series. Cars drive straight through trees, and they tend to warp more than the Enterprise after a bout of red cordial sculling. Getting airborne and sliding around corners just doesn't feel right. And for the love of god, where are the TANKS and JETS! Joint Ops is just begging for these weapons of wanton death and destruction, as most of the vehicles currently in the game are based around transportation rather than extermination. It's rumoured that these will appear in the expansion pack, but that's not good enough. For better or for worse, this makes it quite different to Battlefield in that most of the action takes place on foot.

This is my boomstick

If you like guns, you'll love the armoury. With twenty nine different weapons, including the coolest mortars ever seen in a computer game, there's plenty to play with. Each weapon has iron sights, and you'll have to dial in the range to the target to hit things at long range. To do this you'll first need to look at the target with binoculars, and then adjust the weapon sights - a very nice touch. Bullet drop is also modelled accurately, as is the bullet damage. It only takes a couple of hits to take out a bad guy, and when combined with the Predator camouflage, encourages a very slow and deliberate method of play. Rush headfirst into battle and you'll be pushing up daisies faster than you can cry for a medic. Keep this in



RANGERS LEAD THE WAY

With up to seventy five players per side, this game begs for a commander mode. Which it has! Hooah! This allows you to vote for a commander, who can then set waypoints and issue commands. Sadly, over seven days of extensive playing, we didn't see this feature used a single time. Hopefully this will change as players get comfortable with the game.

Sweet, sweet pixel shaded water

I made contact with Novalogic's head PR guy, who let me know his definition of a dedicated server: "Running the game with /serveonly will allow users without video cards to host servers." Sorry mate, but it still means that server admins have to purchase the game to host a server. Not going to happen. And considering that the clan AUS demo server chewed through 8GB of data per day, we're not going to find many customers running servers. Sure, Novalogic are supposedly looking at hosting the game in Australia, but so far this is just rumour. As a result, one week after the game had been on shelves, there were only four servers in the whole of Australia. Considering the quality of the game, it's unforgivable.

There's another problem, but we're not sure if it's the game's fault or the server we were playing on - it's impossible to know due to the total lack of servers in Australia. During our week of playing, it was often quite laggy, especially when the fighting was up close and personal. However, compared to the state of Battlefield's netcode at launch, it is very stable, so we can't be too harsh.

Joint Ops has incredible potential, covering all of the bases that a first-person shooter needs to succeed; large maps, lots of players, drivable vehicles and cool guns. Unfortunately, without a dedicated server it doesn't have a chance in hell. Wake up and smell the napalm Novalogic, and Joint Ops could well become the online shooter of choice.

Bennett Ring

mind if you want to spend more time fighting the bad guys than travelling from your spawn point to the front line.

One of the nicest touches is the day/night time cycle, which changes the game from day to night every twenty to thirty minutes. It doesn't always get very dark, but when it does you'll need to use night vision goggles, which are the most realistic we've seen in a game.

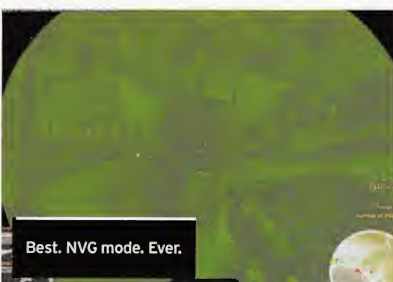
Make no mistake - this is an online shooter, and if you don't have broadband you can kiss this game goodbye, despite its claims of running flawlessly over 56k dial up. There are twelve single-player missions, but these serve as simple training missions. The main game mode is Advance & Secure, which is a direct copy of UT2K4's Onslaught mode. This keeps the battles nice and focused; a

must considering the map sizes. Team Deathmatch and Team King of the Hill are also included.

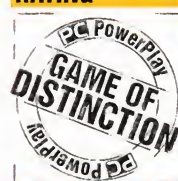
The bad news

By now you're probably thinking about who to sell your copy of Battlefield to, in order to raise the cash for Joint Ops. After all, when it works well, it works better than any shooter on the market. But (there's always a "but", isn't there?), this game faces an issue that we just don't understand.

Dedicated servers. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know that these are absolutely necessary for an online shooter to succeed. Powered by Linux, if possible. Yet Novalogic, in its infinite wisdom, has decided not to release a dedicated server. Oh dear.



RATING



FOR

Has everything an online shooter needs to succeed...

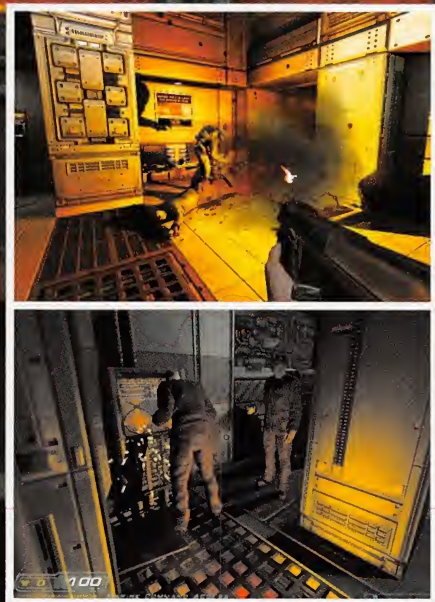
AGAINST

Except for a dedicated server and rock solid netcode. Vehicles are also a little bit dodgy.

OVERALL

Online shooter fans are going to love it, if they can find a server.

83



DOOM 3

Return of the (Car)mack



Developer: id Software ■ Publisher: Activision ■ Distributor: Activision ■ Price: \$99.95 ■ Rating: MA15+ ■ Available: August 3

SYSTEM

NEED

1.5GHz CPU
32MB 3D videocard
w/ HW T&L
256MB RAM

WANT

3GHz CPU
1GB RAM
GeForce 6800 Ultra

MULTIPLAYER

Yes
1-4 players

ONLINE

www.satanicrituals.com

Brush up on your Satanism before tackling the real Hell.

I've just been to Hell and back. Of course, that is Hell with a capital "H", the place with the fire and the brimstone, and the red-skinned beasts with horns and pitchforks and hooves and goatees. I don't mean that playing DOOM 3 is anything like hell. In fact, in an obvious twist, playing DOOM 3 is more akin to a heavenly experience.

You have to admire id Software, not simply for what it has done throughout the years - DOOM and Quake are both icons of PC gaming as well as remaining eminently playable today. You have to allow a certain amount of admiration for the way in which id has gone about

creating this game. Like some other high profile developers working on some other high profile first-person shooters, id has never made any promises it couldn't keep. John Carmack and company may have been building the DOOM 3 technology and honing its design since Quake 3 arrived in very late 1999, but that still equates to a considerably shorter development cycle than, I dunno, Half-Life 2 or Duke Nukem Forever, for example. And throughout those years, the only comment made about a release date has been the now familiar refrain of "When it's done".

With being the first of the "big three" out of the gate, id has remained focused on the job at hand. Not for id the distractions of online content delivery services, multiple technology switches or power levelling Everquest characters (or so we hear). Instead, the Texan studio has concentrated its efforts on perfecting its craft. The game's the thing, you see.

DOOM 3 is a stunning looking game - easily the most technically impressive title this veteran reviewer has ever set eyes upon. But I think we all knew that it would be. Indeed, id is often derided - occasionally in these very pages - as not much more than a technology provider, pumping out powerhouse graphics engines for other developers to build the

actual games. And while such a view may carry a hint of truth - where there's smoke there's fire, after all - it tends to conveniently overlook just well id can design a game or a level when it wants to.

Compare the original DOOMS to any of their contemporaries and the huge gulf in quality is immediately apparent - the enemy placement, the economy of health and ammo, the abundance of secrets, all bear the hallmarks of a team that knew its craft. With Quake, the focus shifted to deathmatch map design which id excelled at again, although Quake 2's solo experience stands as the pinnacle of old-school, pre-Half-Life shooter design.

Now DOOM 3 is without doubt the best demonstration yet of how much Tim Willits and co know about level design. It is an expertly paced experience, peaking and troughing in all the right places at just the right moments, while remaining an unrelenting adrenalin rush from beginning to end. The bar has been genuinely raised for the first time since Half-Life. DOOM 3 is the best first-person shooter ever made.

The beginning stages of...

It all begins innocently enough. You arrive on Mars as part of a recently commissioned security deployment, the reason for which you later learn to be an

SOUL SEEK

One feature that has not been mentioned in the pre-release publicity is the Soul Cube. Obtained about two-thirds of the way through the game, this ancient relic is perhaps your most powerful weapon and becomes nigh-on essential for tackling the hordes of enemies and boss encounters late in the game. It works by absorbing the souls of defeated enemies, both replenishing your health and unleashing supernatural death upon your chosen victims. Which is alright in our book.



The bar has been raised for the first time since Half Life... this is the best shooter ever made

increasing number of bizarre deaths and supernatural phenomena throughout the complex. Accompanying you on board the flight to the UAC (Union Aerospace Corporation) base on the red planet is a scientist named Swann and his bodyguard (the keen-eyed player will notice the latter packing a rather large and all-too-familiar firearm). Upon arrival you overhear a conversation between Swann and another undeniably sinister figure from which the only conclusion to draw is that something, somewhere isn't quite right.

The early stages of the game may come as something of a surprise. In a lengthy sequence reminiscent of Gordon Freeman's arrival at the Black Mesa compound, you are welcomed into a facility just going about its normal daily business. From this point you make your way through various security clearances, chat to numerous UAC employees performing their duties, collect your PDA, and receive instructions to report in with your superior officer, Sergeant Kelly.

This introductory section allows you to devote some time to simply admire the stupendous visuals - and admire you will. You will find yourself getting up close and

personal to study the brilliantly realised character models, their lifelike animation, the way they make eye contact with you when they speak, and perhaps even noting how the Martian atmosphere really does give everyone a pallid, almost undead, complexion.

You will find yourself gazing in unabashed awe at the incredible amount of detail evident in every room; from the touchscreen computer terminals, at which you can download video clips and other messages to your PDA, to the bewildering array of complex machinery functioning right throughout the base. Speaking as someone who has dabbled in map design using an engine from the previous generation (Unreal, to be precise), my mind was thoroughlyoggled by just how much time it must surely take to model and then implement some of the more intricate architectural features. If you've ever wondered why it takes so long to make a game these days, then the environments on display here are your answer.

During this period of calm before the storm, you also receive the opportunity to soak up the atmosphere and familiarise yourself with the abovementioned

environment and characters. Here's where you'll first encounter some key characters and collect hints as to what events may unfold. You'll see inaccessible weapons lock-ups that serve to tease you with the prospect of such firepower in the near future. You'll follow a sentry bot as it guides you through the complex, just as its kind will do again during more hostile times at several points later on. You'll discover some of the history of the Mars base and the UAC research projects from speaking with the plentiful scientists and officers dotted throughout the facility - each has two or three lines of recorded speech, all of which is well acted.

The key point - and perhaps the biggest surprise - is that you don't get your hands on a weapon until about thirty minutes into the game. By which point you've become totally immersed in the game's fiction - you feel like you belong here, you feel like you are a marine responsible for the security of the complex. Through showing you the world as it is during happier times, it has persuaded you to care about that same world once the shit hits the fan. Which it does... right... about... now...

Pinkie and the splattered brains.



Your arsenal

The DOOM 3 shotgun – and believe me when I say I don't speak lightly here – is perhaps the single greatest thing ever. It's also symbolic of what this game is all about: extreme violence on a very intimate scale. The shotty encapsulates this philosophy because it gets you right there, standing toe-to-toe with the enemy, like no other weapon. Whether you're putting a shell into a cacodemon's face before it gets that fireball out or sidestepping a charging pinkie demon before firing point blank into its obese side, the shotgun never ceases to provide immediate gratification. It quickly became my weapon of choice.

One of the advantages of filling a game with non-human foes is that it allows for them to be designed with characteristics that are utterly distinctive. DOOM veterans will remember them: the slow, lumbering zombies; the flame-hurling imps; the ghoulish rocket-launching demons; the disembodied skulls of the lost souls. Their design and behaviour are instantly recognisable and as such each creature requires a slightly different approach. And even though they may seem familiar, the new technology renders them several orders of magnitude more terrifying.

The selection of weapons covers all bases, though it's never a linear equation where this monster requires this weapon. One shell from a shotgun will take out a spider, but let it get too close and it'll have you for breakfast. When they attack in number, the machinegun or chaingun may sound reasonable but you can waste a lot of ammo trying to hit the small target that is the spider's head. Maybe a

between bullet and blood.

The level design enhances this dynamic by messing with your mind in devious ways. Doors blow open as you approach, lights suddenly switch off, bodies get dragged into vents by unseen hands, objects even float and get tossed through the air, then once you're distracted the enemies will strike from the opposite direction. Or, once you think

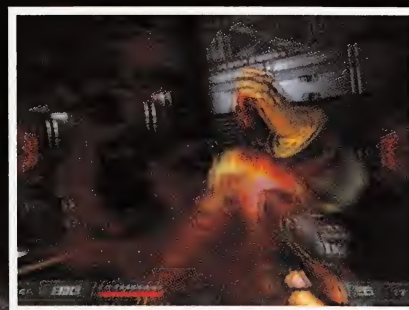
Everything here is geared towards enhancing the kinetic interplay between firearm and foe

well-timed grenade will do the job? Or maybe you should use up some of that pistol ammo you've been hoarding? Such decisions are immensely satisfying.

DOOM 3 is an exemplary case of just how an exquisitely balanced weapon economy can mine greater depth from a seemingly simple situation. In this sense it is a pure, unadulterated shooter in which the only significant gameplay mechanic is in the acquisition and elimination of hostile targets. Anything else is superfluous. Everything here is geared towards enhancing that kinetic interplay between firearm and foe,

you've got it sussed, they'll attack from the same direction. Or from above. Or maybe not at all. This combination of the expected and the unexpected strives to keep you on your toes at all times.

I loved the homages to the original DOOM. One particularly memorable scene sees you venturing down a lengthy corridor, its walls coated in a vaguely familiar blue and grey texture and the lights flashing on and off in sequence. At the far end of the corridor lie a dead body, a chaingun and some body armour. As soon as you collect the booty, the walls slide open and a horde of zombies and





Giger would be proud.

PRE-EMPTIVE STRIKE

As with any high profile game, there will be many people lining up to criticise even the smallest perceived flaws. Indeed, DOOM 3 had already copped its fair share of flak before anyone had even played it. So let me take a moment to address some concerns.

Some will be critical of the indoor environments, as if we've seen it all before, as if huge outdoor levels are the only way forward for game design. Some will be critical of the primitive AI, as if drawn out tactical combat against Mensa-accepted foes is the only war worth waging. Some will be critical of the limited multiplayer options, as if the Battlefield-inspired, team-based formula has become the template all future online games must follow.

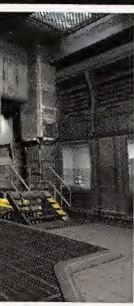
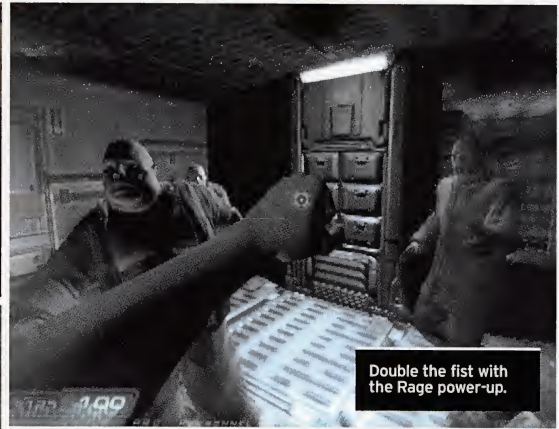
But what needs to be remembered is that no single game can deliver everything. Slatting DOOM 3 for its allegedly cramped level design, AI shortcomings or paltry multiplayer is no different to decrying the lack of driveable vehicles in Thief 3 or too much resource management in Sim City. It's simply missing the point.

Just because Far Cry has vast, outdoor expanses doesn't mean DOOM 3 has to. Just because Deus Ex has skill points and multiple routes doesn't mean DOOM 3 has to. Just because UT2004 boasts hundreds of maps across numerous play modes doesn't mean DOOM 3 has to. If you approach this game thinking it's going to be anything other than a pure, white-knuckled shooter in both single and multiplayer then you're not just going to be sorely disappointed but deluded to boot.

A developer has to play to its strengths. Right from the start, id made the decision to focus its resources on ensuring DOOM 3 was an intense and exhilarating single-player experience that upheld the tradition of the classic original. There's no question that objective has been achieved. The only possible negatives someone could speak of about DOOM 3 would be expressed in terms of an absence - "it lacks this..." or "it lacks that..." I defy anyone to find fault with what id has presented us with here.

In single-player DOOM 3 towers above the best shooters of recent times - I would personally put it in a class above Call of Duty and Half Life. In multiplayer it is peerless in terms of brutally visceral, in-your-face deathmatching - and again, just personally, the immediacy of this sort of online play appeals to me far more than the likes of Battlefield or Joint Ops.





demons are let loose. Taking the hint, you equip the chaingun and empty round after round straight back down the corridor, painting the walls a new shade of red.

Undoubtedly there are countless situations designed to scare you, but the overriding sensation is one of tension. Shadowy figures dart across your periphery vision, crazed voices call out for

another squad of marines there, replace a malfunctioning coolant rod here, track down a plasma inducer there... it never lets up. Indeed, there's a palpable sense of relief on the rare occasions you happen upon another human and are able to lower your weapon and raise your voice.

Cut-scenes perforate proceedings, introducing each new monster in some

much-needed comic touch. Early on you find an email from a guy complaining that an ordered shipment of jackhammers turned out to be chainsaws instead. "What the hell were they thinking?" he writes. "Chainsaws serve no purpose on Mars!" What the hell, indeed...

DOOM 3 does to take you to Hell, although it does take a while to happen. Defying the current trend towards shorter games, id has blessed us with anything but. On the default difficulty, the average player should take around 25 hours without heavy reliance on quicksaves. The next one up will take considerably longer, while the Nightmare level needs to be unlocked.

Its size is remarkable really, when you consider just how much detail and complexity is crammed into the environments. Doubly so, when you realise just how much polish has been applied to the same gritty, chaotic world in order to eke out every last drop of atmosphere.

You may end up in Hell, but it sure is Heaven getting there, let me tell you.

A guy complaining an ordered shipment of jackhammers turned out to be chainsaws instead

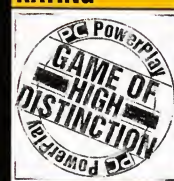
you to follow, satanic runes pulse along the walls, the screen distorts or drips blood and you'll surrender control for a moment all in an effort to unsettle you and sustain an ever-present sense of menace.

Upping the tension is the urgency with which the mission objectives drive the narrative. Ostensibly one long chase sequence throughout the entire UAC facility, the story engages you with its pace, propelling you from point a to b to c with barely a pause for breath as you put the power back online here, catch up with

cool context that seems plausible within this insane world. However, the tale is predominantly told via voice and video links with the other main characters, while the finer details are further fleshed out through accessing emails and video and audio logs on the PDAs of the dead or missing.

In a fashion similar to System Shock, these often give you an insight into exactly what was going down at the base before you arrived and while some are sad and disturbing, others serve up a

RATING



FOR

Gripping atmosphere
Superb level design
Perfect weapon balance
Awesome graphics

AGAINST

We honestly can't think of any

OVERALL

A frighteningly intense experience and an absolute masterpiece of FPS design.

96

David Wildgoose

In the future we fight wars over raw fish.



Ground Control II

And the world looks very different today

Developer: Massive ■ Publisher: Vivendi ■ Distributor: Vivendi ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: M ■ Available: Now

SYSTEM

NEED

P3-900
256MB RAM
64MB videocard
2GB HDD

WANT

P4-2GHz+
512MB RAM
GeForce4+
2GB HDD

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

ONLINE

www.majoriom.biz/deck.html

Uh... It appears some guy has photoshopped pics of his family onto cards to create his own personal tarot deck. Badly. "Be Inspired," he says.

This is a game that will receive screaming, giggling accolades across the length and breadth of the Interweb because it has really amazing graphics. But we PCPP readers know better than to be wowed by really amazing graphics, right? So let's look past the impressive visuals to see if Ground Control 2 is more than just a pretty face.

The gigantic Roman numeral 2 in the game logo should give you a hint that this is indeed a sequel to an early game also called Ground Control. Released in 2000, the game eschewed RTS elements such as base building and resource collecting to focus entirely on the tactical battle. The landscape was quite detailed for its time, and the unit models were nicely detailed.

Ashes to ashes...

GC2 takes the detail of its predecessor and ratchets it all the way up 11. This is a seriously detailed game. We're talking exquisite animated skies, beautifully textured landscapes, delightful water effects and hundreds upon hundreds of incidental objects from burnt out buildings (complete with knocked over chairs on the upper floors) to shattered fast food billboards to the smoking remains of civilian vehicles.

Of course, we might like to ask what the point of having so much detail is when

the most useful zoom level makes everything look decidedly ant-like.

Massive has tried to create a realistic sense of scale for the game, and good on them I suppose. For the first time in RTS, rifles appear to have a range of more than five metres, men look like they could actually fit inside the tanks and turrets they're supposed to capture, and the exposed floors of shattered high rise buildings look like you should walk around on them not bent double under a 4-foot ceiling.

But the upshot is that you will feel somewhat divorced from the action, unless you zoom in, whereupon the game's fabulous detail comes once again to the fore, but you will only be able to see a few units and your enemy will be off the screen.

There's an appropriate Warhammer 40K analogy here. The famous tabletop battler has two major scales: the squad-level standard game and the division-level Epic game which has seriously tiny little miniatures but lets you fight with hundreds in a game instead of dozens. You get a bigger battle, but the visuals are less engaging.

GC2 is exactly like that, but still operates on a squad-level. The range of the weapons means you have to stay zoomed out to make sure your boys aren't walking into an ambush, but at the most useful

zoom level, infantry units are almost impossible to tell apart. Tanks fair rather better, but overall the game definitely lacks the immediacy of C&C Generals.

...funk to funky...

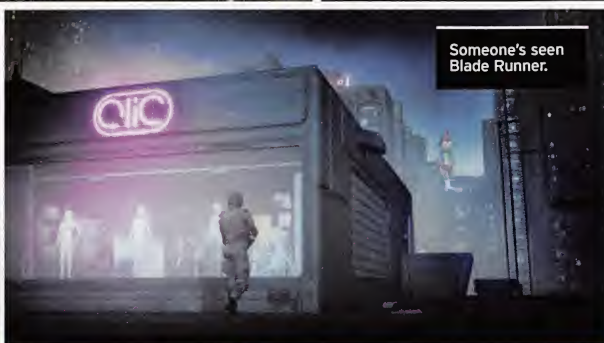
Time then, for some context. GC2 takes place a generation or so into the future of the world of the first game, where the great warring corporations have collapsed (thank God) and the Terran Empire is attempting to re-annex all the old worlds that split off during the wars. The player takes the role of Jacob Angelicus, a captain in the Northern Star Alliance, fighting to preserve his people's independence. A few battles later and a bunch of aliens called the Viron turn up and a plot is hatched to abandon the whole planet to the Imperials and move the population to a far sector of the galaxy using an ancient colony ship equipped with alien technology. Hello? Are you still awake?

Originality aside, the story gives plenty of excuse for a variety of environments from bombed-out cities to dank swamps to icy wastelands to deserts. There are plenty of tilesets, although "tileset" is misleading because the environments do not look like they've been stamped out using a tile-based editor. Rather, everything looks unique and organic, more like an UT 2004 level than a Generals map.



PLAY NICE TOGETHER

One of GC2's tastier features is the co-operative campaign mode in which two players can exchange units and landing zones to defeat the AI. Occasionally, the mode feels a little tacked-on, especially when player two can't even do anything until player one condescends to giving them a few units to go capture their own landing site. Still, we're all for co-op modes here at PCPP, the great underused aspect of multiplayer.

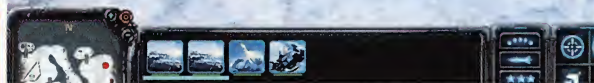


Someone's seen Blade Runner.



LOOK MA BOTH HANDS!

Most units in the game have a secondary fire mode. The marines - the basic infantry unit - can switch from their pulse rifles to an anti-tank missile launcher mode, with the caveat that they can't move while using their missiles. Recon terradynes can cloak, while tanks have various abilities that affect their range and damage capabilities. The other race, the alien Viron, can meld two units to create a second more powerful unit. Their basic infantry, for instance, can meld into a chain-gun wielding super soldier. Units can be subsequently demelded if desired. The secondary mode is cute and adds some spice, but requires extremely high levels of micromanagement to use properly.



Crash! We found the source of the interference. It's some kind of alien pilot. I think we damaged it when we crashed.

"They're everywhere!"

about ten seconds to take down a single opponent. It's also difficult to gauge how much damage your units are taking in the face of enemy fire unless you click on them explicitly and watch their stats. But the explosions are great.

...a junky

It has to be said that the scale for a game of this type is just wrong. It's the major fault with the game and it turns a decent camera into an awkward control system and it wastes the exquisite detail of the units, especially the infantry which look better than Quake 3 models, but are usually zoomed so far away from they look about ten pixels high on your screen.

There are also complicated rules for when units can engage other units, based on line of sight and elevation. But sometimes clicking on an enemy which can't be engaged will be met with a "yes sir!" whereupon the unit will just sit there and do nothing. Similarly, some move orders will be met with "can't do that!" whereupon the unit will move anyway. Finally, every time your squad of twenty marines is faced with a single Imperial sniper in an exposed building they yell: "They're everywhere!"

Ground Control 2 can really only be recommended to those who find the likes of Generals and Warcraft 3 too lightweight for their mighty military minds. Yet it's great to see an intelligent strategy title get the same graphical treatment as an FPS blockbuster.

If you do decide to pick it up, just remember to pause the action every once in a while so you can zoom in and enjoy the extremely pretty pictures.

Anthony Fordham

In keeping with the first game there are no bases to be built although there are numerous structures dotted around the place such as missile launchers, turrets, repair stations and other bonuses. Domination of the map is won by controlling victory points and landing zones, and once all the points on a map are under the player's control, they win.

In the first game, all you had were the units you shipped in with. GC2 adds a reinforcement system by awarding victory points continuously throughout the game based on how much of the map is under the player's control and how many units they currently have in the field. A dropship ferries units to the battlefield and can itself be upgraded until it eventually becomes a flying fortress capable of dealing serious death. Off-map support weapons such as artillery barrages round out the arsenal.

It's a clever way to bring building and resource management into a battle-focused game. The skirmish mode gives the purest example of the gameplay.

...we know Major Tom's...

Here's an example: on a small icy map the objective is to take control of a mining facility. Each side has a landing zone at opposite ends of the map where their dropships can deliver new units. There is a victory point close by for both sides plus a third victory point in the centre of the map at the mine. Extra drop zones are also

located in the far north and far south.

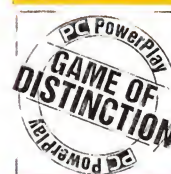
The player starts with 8000 victory points, but their dropship can only carry a certain number of units. The first choice is crucial but there are a multitude of possibilities: bring down a mix of tanks and infantry and quickly throw up a cordon around the central victory point? Bring down heavier weapons for the inevitable smash-tastic endgame? Let the enemy take the central point easily, lulling him into a false sense of security, while you amass heaps of armour just over the rise? Or even upgrade your dropship early, allowing you to bring in more units more quickly?

The choice is complicated because victory points can also be used to call in artillery strikes. Is a quick burst of massive fire worth a delay in your next shipment of tanks? Of how much of the map can you afford to let your opponent take control?

Whatever your initial decision, you will have to keep making decisions throughout the battle. Bringing down units as fast as you can may inadvertently cause you to hit the army size cap, which may leave you weaker later. Moving quickly into the battlefield with a large group of weak units may run you afoul of your opponents heavy armour. When battle is joined it's fast and furious. In fact, it's almost too fast.

Even on the default game speed, a squad of recon terradynes (read: wheeled units) will demolish a single hoverdyne in mere seconds. Yet eight marines will need

RATING



FOR

Exquisite detail
Chunky strategy
Intelligent

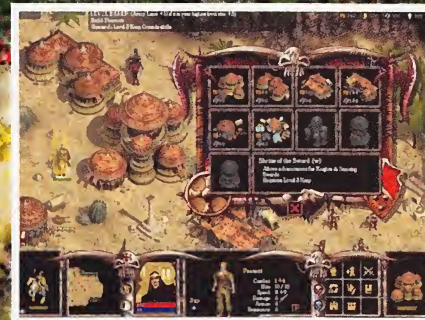
AGAINST

Units too small
Hokey story
AI quibbles

OVERALL

A refreshing step
away from trad RTS,
albeit wrapped up
in a trad sci-fi
package.

81



Warlords Battlecry III

Watching little people kill each other

Developer: Infinite Interactive ■ Publisher: Enlight ■ Distributor: QV Software ■ Price: \$69.95 ■ Rating: G8+ ■ Available: Now

SYSTEM

NEED

PIII 450
128MB RAM
1GB HDD space
16MB video card

WANT

800Mhz+
256MB RAM
Olives
Anchovies

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

ONLINE

www.pizzabot.com.au
Okay, we admit this
joke has gone far
enough.

Boy, do strategy games need a boot in the arse. As good as Warlords Battlecry III is, playing through its campaign is like eating last night's pizza. Is still tastes good, but you know it'd be better for you to eat something a little more fresh. In this case, the pizza got put in the fridge in 2002 after Battlecry II satisfied us with its spicy pepperoni and cheesy goodness. Okay, we're getting off track with the pizza analogy, but really... Where's the RTS equivalent of Half-Life or Deus Ex? The game that transforms the genre? We're still waiting (at this point, the reviewer starts daydreaming about Rome: Total War).

Battlecry II was impressive enough with its 12 playable races and hero character element, but it seems that it wasn't impressive enough. This time around there are 16 different playable races and 28 classes for your hero. Just get your head around that for a second. We're talking 16 very different races (each complete with unique units) to choose from. When it comes to matching

up online skirmishes, you can see just how much multiplayer variety Battlecry III offers - even if it becomes obvious over time which races are clearly easier to play than others.

The single-player campaign this time around is a non-linear RPG style adventure to work through (you can choose from a variety of different locations and quests on the main map at any one time) that offers a very different challenge depending on your choice of race, and the way you develop your hero character. Your hero can now be upgraded during missions, and will turn out to be an extremely powerful unit in the later stages of the game. Yes, Battlecry III (just like Battlecry II) is an ambitious and surprisingly successful RTS monster of a game, now with added RPG zing.

It's delightful to discover just how much flexibility you have in the way you can execute your tactics across the map thanks to the amazing variety of unit types across the all the races. Command the forces of the Undead and swarm the

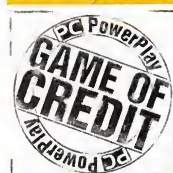
GET CONNECTED

Out of the box, Battlecry III suffers from a number of bugs, some that critically disable the ability to join or host a game online. Not good. Keep checking the warlordsbattlecry3.com website in the hopeful thought that it will soon update with a link to download a patch. While you're there, you might want to also download the PDF files they have specifying the stats on all the different units in the game - information that is mysteriously absent from the manual that comes packed with the game.

map with giant bats, send out the Dark Dwarves and their siege equipment, or hatch dinosaurs as the lizard-like Ssrathi. There's a lot to discover through repeated play, and the balance between units appears to be far better that it was in Battlecry II.

The only real problem with Battlecry III is that the kind of RTS gameplay that it encourages started to get old a few years ago now. If you still enjoy resource collecting, speedy base building and stockpiling combat units until you can overcome your enemy with numbers, then Battlecry III will give you a very entertaining romp. It just feels like it's time for something new, and Battlecry III certainly hasn't evolved enough from Battlecry II to make you want to drop your stuffed crust to play it. In fact, if you Battlecried your heart out in 2002, then like us, you're probably looking to the future for a new kind of strategy game to get the fire burning again. Mmm, woodfired pizza?

RATING



OVERALL

A predictable sequel.
We ordered Gourmet
and got Hawaiian.

67

Where's the RTS equivalent of Half-Life?
The game that transforms the genre?



Eliot Fish

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TECHNOLOGY

Beyond Divinity

Insert your favourite Nietzsche joke here



Developer: Larian Studios ■ Publisher: QV Software ■ Distributor: QV Software ■ Price: \$69.95 ■ Rating: M15+ ■ Available: Now

SYSTEM

NEED

800MHz CPU
256MB RAM
64MB Videocard
2GB HDD

WANT

Planescape:
Torment

MULTIPLAYER

No

ONLINE

www.beyond-divinity.com

Apply for a job as a voice actor here.

Diablo has an awful lot to answer for. Thanks to Blizzard's efforts in creating the most popular and successful role-playing game of all time, every RPG developer has since tried to follow suit by aping its fast-paced formula. Beyond Divinity (the hyperbolically titled sequel to the tautologically titled Divine Divinity) only departs from the template by throwing hundreds of quests at you in an ultimately futile attempt to add depth to the world. In a genre so heavily reliant on statistics, it's apt to find a game developed in such by-the-numbers fashion.

Developer Larian's first mistake was to seek inspiration only from other games. Veteran role-players will have seen the awkward companion system, stilted animation, derivative character stats, frantic click-fest combat, hokey plot and embarrassing voice acting in countless other titles. Though, of course, they will have rarely seen them in such unspectacular combination.

This reviewer's major issue concerns the game's central premise, which sees your created character "soul-bonded" with a Death Knight at the start of play. This means you have a party of two characters to control and the death of one means the death of the other due to their unique, almost inextricable link. Which is okay (although the death thing gets annoying), except the obnoxious, overbearing and cantankerous Death Knight is quite possibly the most unlikeable RPG character ever. It doesn't help that the script in general is tripe and the voice acting (read: bellowing) cringeworthy, but all I wanted to do was punch him in the face. Except I couldn't, 'cos we were "soul-bonded". Thanks, Larian.

Combat is decidedly Diablo-esque, albeit without the same user-friendly interface. A good RPG demands a solid, tactical combat engine where you can pause and issue orders without fumbling through the manual for hotkeys. Beyond Divinity tries in this respect but the

SENSIBLE SPAWNING!

The Battlefields are Larian's solution to the problem of respawning monsters. The typical RPG will force you to fight the same enemies in the same locations each time you visit - the point being you need the experience gained in order to level up enough to tackle the big bad guys. Sure it makes sense from a design perspective, but it is nonsense in terms of maintaining the credibility of the game fiction. Here, however, should the next battle prove troublesome you can take some time out and visit the inter-dimensional portal that is the Battlefields. Much like the Modron Cube from Planescape Torment, these are randomly generated dungeons full of monsters and treasure just waiting to be slaughtered and plundered in the name of XP.

an unhealthy addiction to generic fantasy CRPGs will buy it and endure it and even persuade themselves they're enjoying it simply because there aren't that many generic fantasy CRPGs on the shelves right now.

Some (perhaps slightly deranged) RPG addicts may well think of it as a diamond in the rough - that is, it's exactly the sort of vaguely amateurish yet resolutely hardcore PC game that elitist PC gamers love to obsess over while the rest of us wonder what the fuss is about. Beyond Divinity is the X2: The Threat of CRPGs. And if you can comprehend that last sentence then this game is probably for you.

David Wildgoose

RATING



OVERALL

A hardcore old-school RPG for fans only.

62

Those possessed of an unhealthy addiction to generic fantasy CRPGs will buy it and endure it



result is still too awkward and cumbersome. It's also just too fast, which often means a party member will die before you can react and replenish his health. In a game where the "Game Over" screen descends at the death of any party member and one wrong turn can throw you into a totally unwinnable fight, you soon learn to save before every encounter.

Truth be told, there's little genuinely bad on display here. Those possessed of



Kreed

Golden brown, texture like sun...

Developer: Burut ■ Publisher: Russobit-M ■ Distributor: Acclaim ■ Price: \$69.95 ■ Rating: M15+ ■ Available: Now

It's probably best to start a review of Kreed by letting the game speak for itself: "We have always called this ship a Secret Light Arc for it here (sic) that Jikreeds first contacted Prazars, the mighty race that holds the mystery of KREED." All capitals reproduced faithfully from the text.

I first came across Kreed back when I was doing that big-arse preview of every shooter currently in development. I poked gentle fun at the concept of "Tiglaary Death Factories" which the game promised. Well, I didn't see many death factories in my brief time with Kreed, but the Tiglaary were mentioned, along with Legion, the Soulless, the Secret Light Arc and a bunch of other nonsensical stuff you get when a bunch of Russians start picking English sci-fi words at random.

Brown shoes...

Now, I'm all for trying out new locations in FPS games. We're all sick of ruined cities, abandoned space posts and haunted hillbilly backwoods, so it was initially refreshing to be dropped into Kreed's kind of organic weird space construct thing, but alas, it turns out that no amount of funky architecture is going to save this game.

First up, the developer is just that little bit too fond of the cut-and-paste method of level design. You run down a corridor like the inside of someone's large intestine, into a room with three sphincter-doors and a glowy thing in the middle, choose one of the doors, enter another identical corridor, run down it to an identical room with sphincters, repeat. And did I mention everything is a disturbing, digestive brown? How the hell is this a Secret Light Arc? Do they in fact mean Ark, and just didn't pick up on the subtle difference? What, in short, is going on?

You will never get a handle on Kreed. You are some kind of marine who wears, against all odds, what appears to be a silver snail shell with utility belt. You carry eight crappy weapons and a couple of types of grenades. Your health is a weapon, which you must equip, and then 'fire' into you arm, except the more health you use at once, the less effective each separate 'ampule' becomes.

...don't make it

The weapons don't really do much to inspire. There's a crappy shotgun, a crappy 'pellet' rifle, a slightly meatier shotgun and a selection of

chaingun/flamer/rocket/rail variants. For some reason though, you start the game with every weapon.

In fact, the first thing you will do in Kreed is run down a perfectly straight corridor with no doors or turns or alcoves, being spat at by what appears to be the mortgage monster from that series of ads currently on TV.

There is a story, but you will only want to follow it to marvel at the voice acting. Truly, Kreed has the very worst of the very worst voice acting. It's so bad, it's oddly compelling. Not only are the actors crap, the voices for each character are completely inappropriate. Rulers of massive war-torn cities talk like theatrical nerds and the hero himself sounds like he's communicating via modulation of his bottom-burps.

There is a mind-state that will let you enjoy Kreed: if you dig on being freaked out by a strangely inept story that makes you feel like you're floating through a very mild acid flashback, this is a game for you. If on the other hand you want more gameplay and less inexplicable rainbow particle-effect walls in the middle of nowhere for no good reason, you should avoid it.

Anthony Fordham

SYSTEM

NEED

P3-900
128MB RAM
64MB video card
1GB HDD

WANT

P4-2GHz+
512MB RAM
GeForce4
1GB HDD

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

ONLINE

www.kreed.com
Damn it, Creed has split up, however, most of the band is reforming as "Alter Bridge" which is a much sillier name.

RATING



OVERALL

Kreed begs the question: what were they thinking?

44

WORST RATS EVER

There's nothing like including killer rats to make a game world seem more alive. Especially if those rats are in the sewers. But what if, like in Kreed, the rats look like some kind of lap dog that's been turned inside out and given a pair of bat wings? How should we respond? Shoot it obviously, but how should we inside feel? I really can't say. These rats do explode with a satisfying pop, though.



MVP Baseball 2004

Can EA tonk this one out of the ballpark?

Developer: EA Sports Canada ■ Publisher: Electronic Arts ■ Distributor: Electronic Arts ■ Price: \$69.95 ■ Rating: G ■ Available: Now

SYSTEM

NEED

700MHz CPU
256MB RAM
32MB video card

WANT

1.5GHz CPU
512MB RAM
GeForce FX 5700

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

ONLINE

www.anchoragehubs.com/classic.htm

The place to find all your favourite baseball anthems

Baseball might not be the most popular sport down under, but that doesn't mean Aussies can't appreciate the art of swinging wooden sticks at tiny balls. It makes for a very different game than other ball sports, with a level of fanfare unmatched by our homegrown sports.

Instead of having to keep an eye on a large chunk of the field with multiple buff guys running around, baseball is focused on one or two players for most of the time – the pitcher and the batter. This gives the player a more intimate connection with the characters than in other sporting games. EA have made the most of this, imbuing each player with such attention to detail that it's easy to pick the difference between them. As well as correctly modeling their stance while batting, not to mention the pot belly on certain players, the developers have gone to the trouble of accurately

CONTROL FREAK

There is one major problem with the game, and it's in the controls. For starters, don't even bother picking this one up unless you've got a control pad. But the real problem lies in the fact that only a limited range of control pads are compatible with the game. If you try using one of the many that isn't, there's no way to bind the controls to suit your pad. Quite crazy.

animating the way the big names pitch and bat. These animations are truly special, giving the game a very realistic look, and there's a stack of different moves included. A neat little touch is the fact that if your batter takes a running dive for a base, he'll be wearing



The biggest difference to the series is in the Dynasty mode. Which is just a fancy way of saying career mode

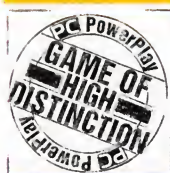
compared to the original, which isn't a bad thing considering how solid it was. However, it is a little too easy to pitch accurately – if you walk somebody in this game it's because you planned to, not because you weren't skillful enough. If you don't trust your ball skills you can have the AI control the fielding of your team, but you'll be missing out on half of the fun. Besides, fielding is actually quite simple compared to the batting.

The biggest difference to the series is in the Dynasty mode. Which is just a fancy way of saying career mode. This now lets you manage a team over a period of several years, and you can also draft low level players and cultivate them into one of the stars of tomorrow. There's a stack of unlockable features, including classic uniforms and legendary players such as Lou Gehrig. Sound is yet another highlight of the game, with a myriad of player theme songs, excellent commentary and atmospheric crowd effects.

There's no denying that MVP Baseball 2004 is a sweet baseball game. Even those who are new to the genre will find it a ball, more so when playing with a pal.

Bennett Ring

RATING



OVERALL

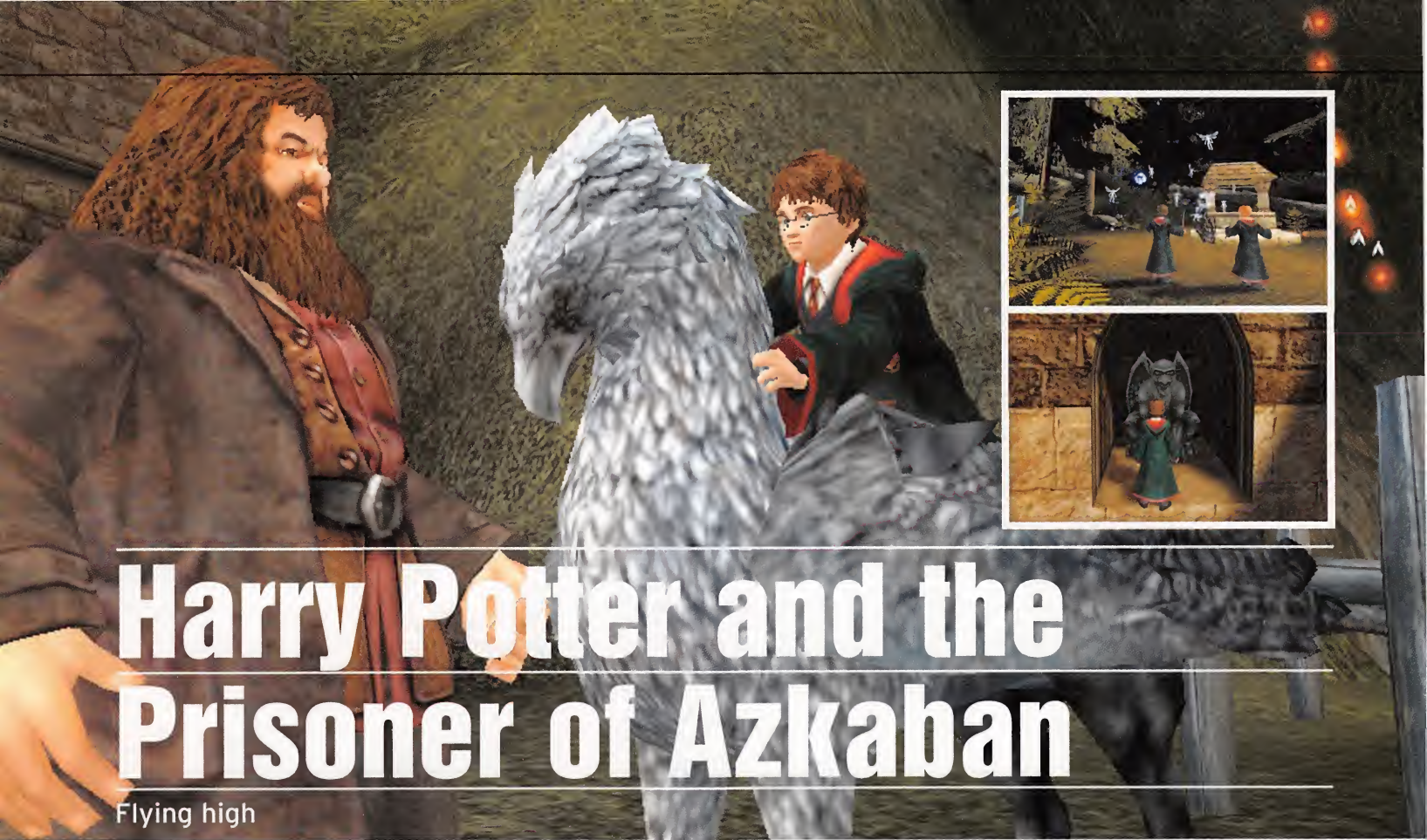
EA have hit a homer with the latest in the MVP series

88



dirt for the rest of the match. The visuals are one of the game's highlights, and are a huge improvement over the original, but that's not to say that the rest of the game is lacking.

A new batting system known as Pure Swing has been introduced, and it captures the feel of real world batting nicely. You have to keep a close eye on where the pitch is going, and then use your control pad to aim in the same direction as the pitch. Throw in some split second timing and it's almost as hard as the real deal. The pitching system hasn't really changed when



Developer: Electronic Arts ■ Publisher: Electronic Arts ■ Distributor: Electronic Arts ■ Price: \$49.95 ■ Rating: G ■ Available: Now

The world is divided into two types of person – those who love Harry Potter and those who loathe him. And once again we're being engulfed by Potter-fever, with the release of the movie and game of the third installment in the series, Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban.

Love or hate, though, everyone has at least heard the name Harry Potter. It's with this in mind that the game begins.

The assumption that you know the story seems a bit arrogant – there is no introduction or back story provided for any of the characters, or any information on why the characters are in an uproar about this Sirius Black person; but it does cut back rather significantly on the cut-scene time so that there's more room for actual playing.

Threesome

The first major change is that all three of the main characters – Harry, Ron and Hermione – are now playable. You'll not be able to pick and choose whom you play and when, though. Most of the time, you'll be playing Harry, with Ron and Hermione playing support and backup roles according to their extra abilities – Hermione can crawl into smaller spaces, and Ron has some kind of sixth sense. If it's authenticity you want, you may as well stop right there, since the book makes no mention of any such abilities, but it does add an interesting spin on the gameplay.

You'll also obtain the Marauder's Map. Since Hogwarts is, by its very nature, convoluted and confusing, this is an item that you'll come to rely on very



THREE HEADS ARE BETTER THAN ONE

This is the first Harry Potter game that makes decent use of the supporting cast. In previous titles, Ron and Hermione hung around just being props, but now both are playable. Don't get too excited – the game dictates exactly when, where and how you will play each character, as the bulk of the gameplay still centres on Harry. And, even though there is more than one playable character, there is no multiplayer component, which would have been a nice addition, even if it was just for mini-games. But it's still a step in the right direction.

heavily indeed, and makes a nice improvement on the previous Harry titles.

In addition to the good ol' Quidditch matches, involving flight and a broomstick, you'll have missions involving the Hippogriff, Buckbeak. This is very different to zooming around on the Nimbus, and a little more thought is involved, since to fly through the rings on the courses,

you need to judge your swoops and flap Buckbeak's wings accordingly by clicking the right mouse button.

Tax free

Of course, there's the usual run of activities for you to engage in – collecting Bertie Bott's Beans to purchase goodies from the Weasley twins, competing in fierce Quidditch matches, finding the collectible cards from the chocolate frogs to upgrade your HP. The gameplay is not mentally taxing or difficult in any way, either, so you should be playing like a pro within half an hour.

This is due to, in part, the smooth user interface and the tight camera controls. You'll also receive clues from other characters along your quest, and Ron and Hermione will prod you in the right direction if you take too long about a task. Don't stress too much about missing stuff. When you have completed all your tasks for one day, you'll be given an option to end the day, or to roam about Hogwarts at your leisure – a nifty feature, since it allows for a range of gaming styles.

From a purely cosmetic perspective, the interaction between the characters is kinda neat. They chatter and argue and offer hints and tips, and you can go up and talk to the numerous people roaming the halls. Hogwarts itself is a joy to behold. While some of the rooms and corridors can get a bit samey, they're still well-crafted and the graphics are very clean-cut and solid.

There's nothing particularly taxing about Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban. It is targeted at the younger demographic, after all. But you might find yourself loading it up after they're all in bed for a little bit of magical adventure... and sometimes it's simplicity that is the most fun.

Michelle Starr

SYSTEM

NEED

500MHz CPU
64MB RAM
16MB Videocard
550MB HDD

WANT

1GHz CPU
256MB RAM
32MB Videocard
850MB HDD

MULTIPLAYER

No

ONLINE

<http://harrypotter.ea.com/hppoa/>
Need to catch up on your Herbology? Want the latest Quidditch scores? It's all here!

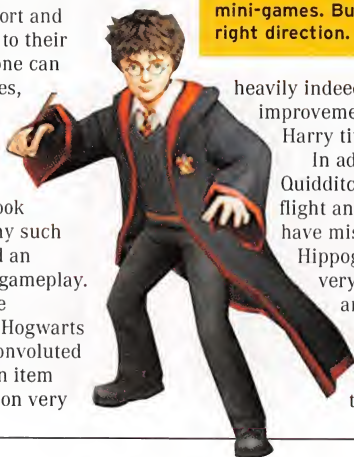
RATING



OVERALL

Fans of Harry Potter will get a kick out of this game, and even those who are indifferent will find something to like.

76



50	0	\$3.00	>50
50	0	\$18.00	>50
41	0	\$3.67	>50
40	0	\$10.67	>50
40	0	\$41.67	>50
40	0	\$18.00	>50
40	0	\$4.33	>50
30	0	\$20.00	>50
22	0	\$0.67	>50
21	0	\$12.67	>50
20	0	\$3.00	>50
20	0	\$0.67	>50
20	0	\$2.33	>50

Explosives

Price: \$12.67

Market: 0

Current: 0

New: 0

Victoria

Empire Under the Sun. Oh, the irony.

Developer: Paradox Entertainment ■ Publisher: Strategy First ■ Distributor: Red Ant ■ Price: \$69.95 ■ Rating: G ■ Available: Now

SYSTEM

NEED

P450
128Mb RAM
4Mb Videocard
600Mb HDD space

WANT

Want: P800
256Mb RAM
32Mb Videocard

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

ONLINE

<http://www.paradoxplaza.com/victoria.asp>
Links to the forum and patches ...
you'll need this.

RATING



OVERALL

Fat with complexity and detail, but unapproachable like a stuck-up History Professor.

70

In the years that the game covers, from 1836 to 1920, the world was re-forged by the coal fires of the industrial revolution. Empires rose and were consumed, and if you are a fan of modern history and strategy games then maybe, just maybe, you have the burning desire required to get into this game.

There are approximately 120 nations to choose from (although most of them will be impossible to win with), 3000 provinces, 52 resources and 10 social classes that populate your nation. What's more, everything is linked together in complicated ways.

You need a variety of factories to produce most of those 52 resources and you need various different workers, labourers, farmers, clerks, clergy and soldiers to keep the factories going, produce troops and generate research points. Each different class also needs to be able to afford certain quantities of these 52 resources to stay happy. Naturally, the rules of supply and demand function in some form meaning that sometimes you find that you can't even build factories because you have no machine parts, and without machine parts you can't make the factories that make machine parts and so on.

This wouldn't be so bad except that while the game tells you what you're missing, it doesn't point you anywhere. Obviously, you can take manual control over your trade settings and try order some, alternately you could try invading a nearby province with such a factory ... but nowhere does it point you to trade settings or ripe provinces. If you decide to invade you could crush your ability to produce anything by converting too many labourers into soldiers (to support new unit creation) and you could plunge your Prestige points - and hence your overall ranking - into the toilet by breaking one tangled treaty or another (that you might have signed with a third party).

Patch it up

As complex as it is, the game mechanics are pretty solid and Paradox is doing a good job of ironing out the details and tweaking the balance with each new patch. (Get the patches ASAP.) It might even manage to catch the occasion crash-to-desktop bug soon.

Once you're up and running, the game is smart enough to give you a good challenge but the four campaigns, which merely start you at pre-defined points in history with the



GAME IMITATING LIFE

While the whole point of the game is that you can blaze new paths through history, there are certain bonuses to having passed your essays on WWI in Social Studies.

You can trigger some hefty events if you know what to do, like the Unification of Germany (which brings several states to join your faction). All you need to do is: defeat Denmark at least once in a war, follow through on the events that lead to war with Austria and then hold Paris sometime after 1871 to re-create the Franco-Prussian War. Simple, huh?

appropriate set-up, feel a little claustrophobic. This is compounded by the fact that single victory condition is becoming the Big Cheese by 1920, which makes many of the nations little more than filler.

There is a multiplayer component but Victoria's meticulous pace and the nations' unequal starting power make it a tricky proposition indeed.

Ultimately, Victoria is a fortress to crack. If you have played Hearts of Iron or Europa Universalis then at least you come with a grappling hook. Beyond that, the forums and a lot of research are the key.

If you can bypass its defences, Victoria is a massively detailed war game, littered with interesting historical facts and armed with endless options to tweak for a competitive edge and countless ways to screw your foes. The remarkable treaty system and peace-broking systems are complex joy to behold... if you are that way inclined. Hardcore fans - with the burning desire I mentioned above - will love it, everyone else should run for the hills.

Timothy C. Best

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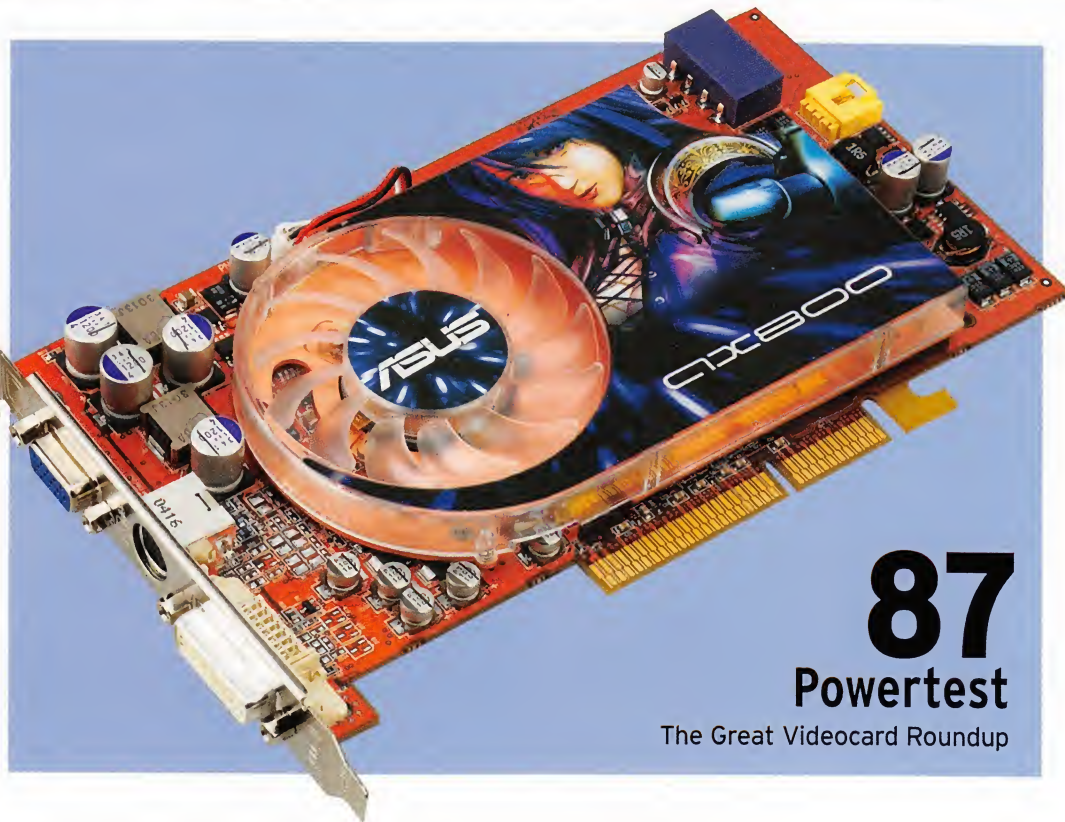
TECH IN REVIEW

The moment we've all be waiting for is finally here - PCI Express has landed! Huzzah! It's the biggest change to the infrastructure of the PC in ten years, and after having a play with it we can happily announce that it's about as exciting as formatting a floppy disk. The phrase "Let Down" isn't quite strong enough to describe our reaction to this new technology. "Crashing downwards through the Earth's crust to its molten core" is probably a better way to describe our expectations.

For the meager price of a new CPU, motherboard, PSU, video card and memory upgrade, the move to a PCI Express platform rewards the user with a whole lot of... nothing. A couple of our tests showed a small performance increase, but these were offset by the other tests which showed slower results than seen on our "old" PCI based platform. Oh dear. It's hard to remember the last time a hardware launch with this much hyperbole behind it delivered so little. Damn those marketers!

But the news isn't all bad. By giving us a speedier foundation for the PC, our beloved platform now has more headroom to grow in the future. Also, we only took a look at Intel's implementation of PCI Express, so hopefully the comparable AMD platform shows more of an improvement. Somehow though, we doubt it.

When you read part one of our Video card roundup, you'll see that our PowerTools have changed. We've upgraded our video card tests to more accurately reflect the mixture of games that today's PC gamers play. On the one hand we



87 Powertest

The Great Videocard Roundup

chose games that use cutting edge features such as FarCry, while on the other we used games that are based on technology that is several years old, such as the Quake 3-based Call of Duty. Using these tools you'll now be able to see how well a video card runs the games of today, as well as the games of tomorrow.

- 94 Acer Travelmate 8000
- 96 Tablet shootout
- 98 The Whole Shebang - PCI Express

Bennett Ring
Deputy Editor
bennetr@next.com.au

HOW WE TESTED

For an in-depth explanation of how we test video cards, CPUs, and motherboards head to our PowerTools section on page 104. You'll also see a list of hardware that makes up the PCPP testbenches, which are used for the testing of the majority of our hardware.

Where possible we use benchmarks based on real world games to test hardware performance; this way we know for sure which component will give you the best gaming experience. We don't love hardware for hardware's sake - it's all about using this hardware to make your entertainment

even more, well, entertaining. We also try to compare the review product with the current "best of class" piece of hardware, so at the end of the day you'll know exactly which product offers you the best bang for buck.

For a product to earn a Power Award, price be damned, we're just looking at how this product performs. If there's nothing better, that we've seen at least, it'll get the Power Award. However, if a product offers a great level of performance or features for a very reasonable price, it'll get the Value Award. Simple, really.





Bennett Ring didn't look busy enough this month, so we thought we'd get him to test every graphics chipset on the planet.

Buying a CPU is simple compared to buying a video card. A quick look at the number at the end of the CPU model allows you to see a rough estimate of the chip's performance. Unfortunately things aren't quite as simple when it comes to video cards. While they usually use a numbering system that supposedly indicates how fast the card is, it's not an infallible system.

For starters, the numbering system is only comparable within an individual company's product line. So a NVIDIA GeForce FX 5700 isn't necessarily slower than an ATI RADEON 9200, even though the numbering scheme suggests otherwise. However, a RADEON 9200 *should* be slower than a RADEON 9600.

It's as if the whole scheme is designed to confuse the poor customer into buying any old card

The other problem is the blasted letters that both companies like to attach to the end of the numbers. We've got XT's, ULTRAS, GTs, PROs, SEs and no doubt a few more cryptic codes on the way. How on earth is a customer supposed to know that the SE is slower than the XT on the ATI cards, yet XT signifies a slower card when used by NVIDIA? It's as if the whole scheme is designed to confuse the poor customer into buying any old card, rather than being a meaningful measuring stick of performance.

Every second email I receive from a reader is usually along the lines of "is card A faster than card B?", so we realised that there a lot of confused gamers out there. And there was only one solution. Test every single graphics card chipset on the market.

While that sounds like a daunting task, it's a bit simpler than it we'd like our bosses to believe. We're talking chipsets, not actual graphics cards. So if there are five different cards based on a certain chipset (such as the GeForce FX 5950), all from different manufacturers, we only need to test one of these cards. This is because each manufacturer uses a "reference design" when building video cards based on a chipset, which is

supplied to them by either ATI or NVIDIA (for the purpose of this article we're ignoring the niche cards such as those from XGI). Every manufacturer builds these cards in pretty much the same way. They can individualise the card in a couple of ways, such as using a different heatsink or memory that can be overclocked faster, but at default speeds all the of the various manufacturer's cards should return identical performance. This is why it's wise to shop around for your video card - if you can find

Manufacturer A's version of a card cheaper than Manufacturer B's, go for the cheapest version unless overclocking or the software bundle is a priority.

Two parts

We've had to break this article up into two parts, as we simply couldn't test all of these chipsets in one month. Part one sees ATI's entire product line put to the test, while next month it will be NVIDIA's turn under the spotlight.

To test the cards we utilised our new video card PowerTools. It's out with the old, and in with the new. As you'll see, we've tried to make our PowerTools represent real world gameplay first and foremost, with three game-based benchmarks.

First off the ranks is the demanding FarCry, which makes heavy use of DirectX9 shaders. Next up is UT2K4, which isn't quite as demanding and thus gives the mid-level cards more of a chance. After all, not everybody demands cutting edge performance from their hardware. Call of Duty represents the rapidly diminishing OpenGL arena, which we'll be able to kiss goodbye to once a certain rocket ship designer finally retires.

Aquamark 3 is a synthetic benchmark based on a real world game engine, and while this game engine isn't widely in use, it's a very accurate benchmark for DX9 performance that scales nicely. Our final two tests were designed to stress anisotropic filtering and antialiasing performance. Both were run with 4XAA and 8XAF at

FORGET THE MEMORY

If I had a dollar for every time somebody said "But my card has 256MB of memory on it, so it should be hella fast!" I could probably afford to buy a couple of meal deals at Macca's. The truth is that the onboard memory amount is insignificant compared to the chipset used by the card, and is one of those marketing terms that are splashed around to sucker people out of their cash. Sure, it can make a difference when you're running at very high resolution and with high levels of antialiasing, but this usually only applies to the high end cards. Don't be fooled by this ploy ever again - a 256MB card is not always faster than a 128MB one!

quality mode, in the games UT2K4 and Call of Duty. This level of eye candy is the most commonly used in the real world. You'll notice that some of the cards didn't make it through a few of these benchmarks, as they were incompatible with them. Overall you should look to the Call of Duty and UT2K4 benchmarks for performance with older games, while FarCry and Aquamark 3 are best for looking at framerates in cutting edge games.

We usually publish scores with our PowerTest mini-reviews, but not this time around. Think of this two part special as a guide to overall performance of each chipset. It's up to you to figure out whether or not that performance fits your budget.

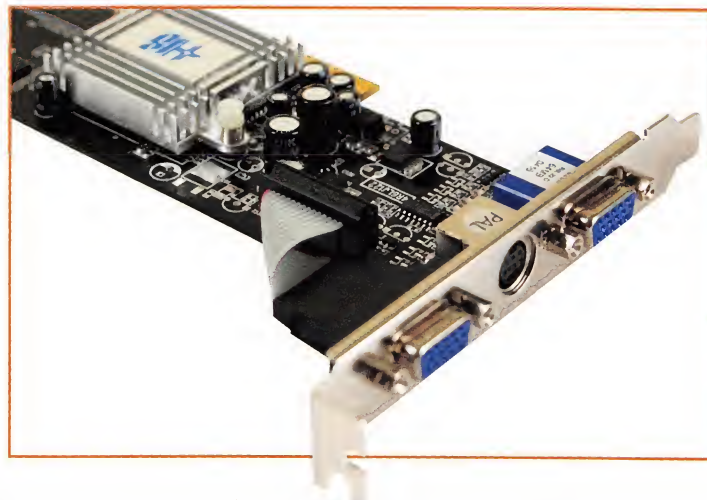
HIS RADEON 7000

• Price: \$79 • Supplier: AKA tech www.akatech.com.au • Website: www.hightech.com.hk

Video cards don't get much cheaper than this. And judging by its benchmarks, they also don't get any slower. Designed for a high end gaming rig this chipset most definitely is not. In fact, if you want to play any game at all this card isn't going to be much chop unless that game is Solitaire and you play it in black and white at 640 x 480.

The 7000 we reviewed has a relatively small amount of onboard memory, at 64MB, and uses the AGP 4X interface. But what really hobbles it is the underpowered RADEON 7000 processor, which runs at 300MHz. However, if you're looking for the cheapest possible card for a theatre PC, the RADEON 7000 just might do the trick. It's got dual VGA out as well as S-Video out, but the best thing is the fan on the heatsink. There isn't one. Silent computing here we come!

Unfortunately the gaming performance was truly shocking. We couldn't run any of the newer DX9 titles on it as it's only a DX8 part, and when we could run games the frame rates were atrocious. But what do you expect for a mere eighty bucks?

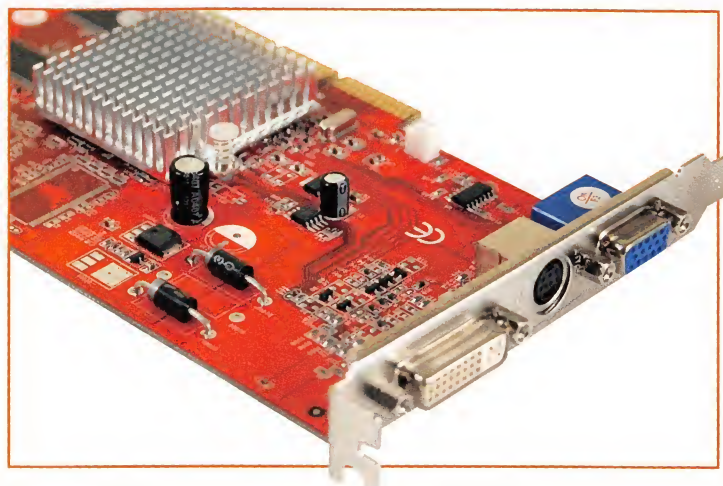


XpertVision RADEON 9200 SE

• Price: \$94 • Supplier: Altech www.altech.com.au • Website: www.xpertvision.com.tw

The main difference between this card and the other 9200s is the use of a 64-bit memory interface, while the others use a 128-bit memory bus. This has a large impact on gaming performance, but like most of the budget cards gaming performance wasn't anything special to begin with. Considering this card is a mere \$15 more expensive than the 7000, it's surprising to see that our 9200 SE has twice the memory, with 128MB of onboard DDR-RAM. It was also able to run the DX9 benchmarks. Sure, performance was still woeful, but it was vastly superior to the 7000, at up to three times the speed in some tests. Even the UT2K4 result at 1024 x 768 was almost playable, at 30 frames per second.

As well as a VGA and S-Video output, this card ships with a DVI output. Like the 7000, the 9200 SE also uses a passive heatsink, making this a prime candidate for your theatre box. If you're thinking of purchasing a 7000, you might as well spend the \$15 extra to get hold of a 9200 SE. However, it's a significantly larger card than the 7000, so if space is at an absolute premium you might have to stick with the cheaper card.

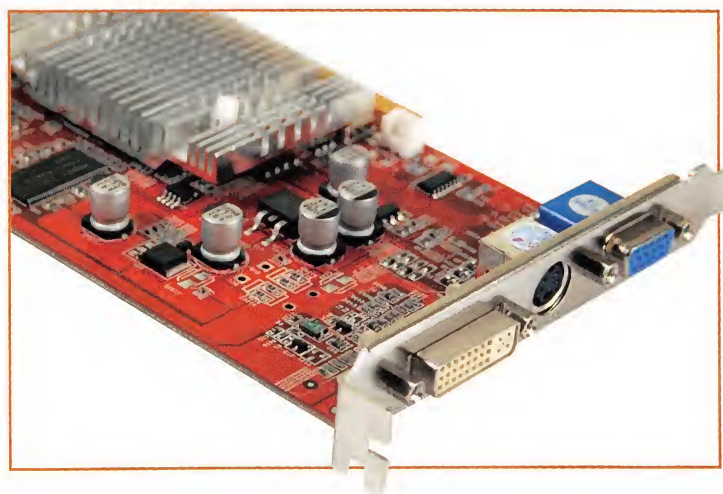


S-Media RADEON 9200

• Price: \$119 • Supplier: Bluechip Infotech www.bluechipit.com.au • Website: www.s-media.com

It's amazing the difference that the memory bus can make on a graphics card. Compare this card to the 9200 SE, which has a crippled 64-bit bus, and it's obvious. This card has a nice 128-bit memory bus, and the differences can be seen as soon as you take a look at the benchmarks. Sure, it's also got a faster core speed than the SE, but the main performance boost is due to the faster memory bus. Our 128MB version managed to average at least 50% higher performance than the SE version, and in some cases almost doubled it. However, by no means does this mean the 9200 is a great card for gaming.

While it's happy to take on titles that are a few years old, it's going to be humbled by today's high tech titles. It scored well in the UT2K4 test, but it must be remembered that this is built on tech that is a couple of years old - in the DX9 engines the performance was unplayable. Our review sample had the 1 x VGA, 1 x S-Video and 1 x DVI output configuration that is common to most ATI cards. Once again a passive heatsink makes this a worthy candidate for your silent computing needs.

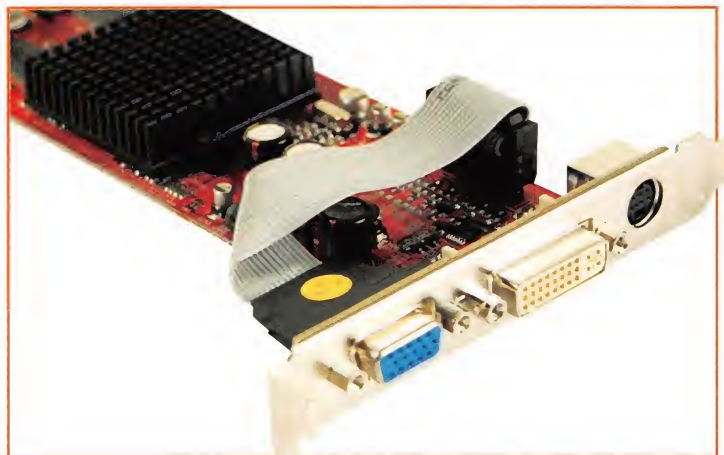


PowerColor RADEON 9550 SE

• Price: \$121 • Supplier: Australia IT www.australiait.com.au • Website: www.powercolor.com.tw

With the arrival of high-end speed demons from both NVIDIA and ATI over the last few months, we'd forgive you for missing the arrival of this low-end chipset. We didn't see it coming either. As with all of the budget cards so far, a passive heatsink is used, and this DX9 compatible card also includes DVI, VGA and S-Video outputs. Once again, the SE version of the chipset has had its memory bandwidth hobbled, with the 9550 SE having a 64-bit bus compared to the 9550's 128-bits. As to be expected, this has resulted in a significant performance difference between the two.

In fact, this version of the 9550 performs almost identically to the 9200 in most circumstances. This makes it a very poor performer in new games, but at least it should be fine with the older stuff. However, the Call of Duty benchmark showed it to be much slower than the 9200. Because both cards are practically the same price, we have to recommend the 9200 over this card due to these poor results.

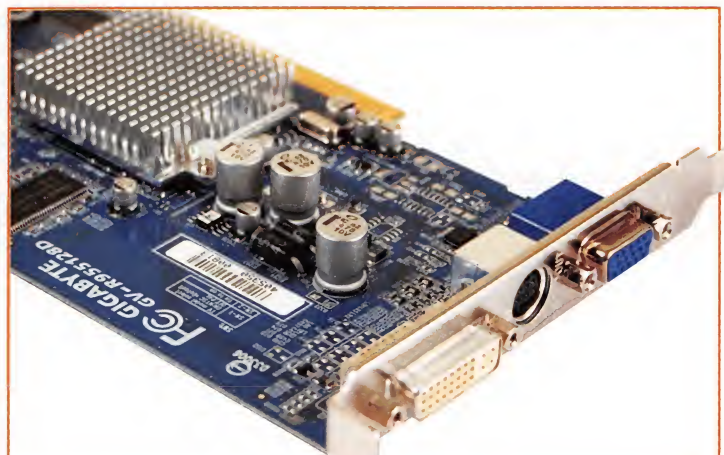


Gigabyte RADEON 9550

• Price: \$165 • Supplier: Synnex www.synnex.com.au • Website: www.gigabyte.com.tw

This is ATI's other new entry into the "my home is a cardboard box" price range, and ups the ante for low end performance. It's a significantly smaller card than the 9200s, even though our review unit included 128MB of memory. A passive heatsink makes it great for the silent PC user, while full DX9 compatibility means it's theoretically possible to run today's games. The ability to run anisotropic filtering at 8X puts it ahead of the 6X limit faced by the 9200 and its lower priced cousins.

However, when it came time to run some games, it soon became apparent that this card still doesn't have the oomph to perform well in cutting edge games. Both of the DX9 intensive tests, FarCry and Aquamark, wielded very poor performance results at a maximum of 15 frames per second at low resolution. Thankfully it held up quite well when running the other two games, and surprisingly even retained a playable of performance when 4XAA and 8XAF was implemented, but only at the lowest resolutions.



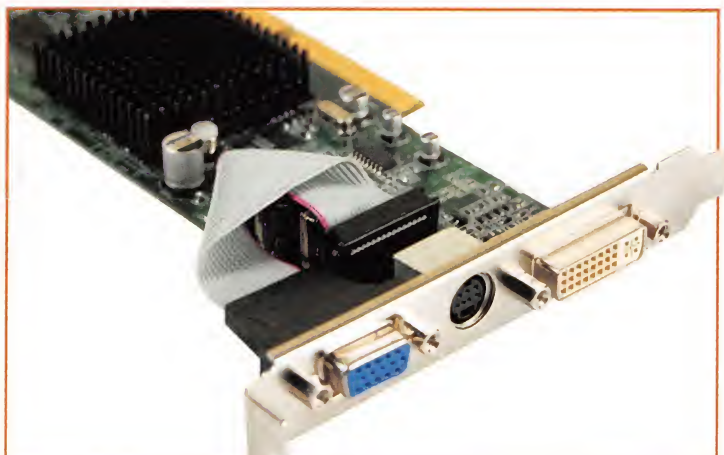
Sapphire RADEON 9600 SE

• Price: \$140 • Supplier: Achieva www.achieve.com.au • Website: www.sapphiretech.com

This card is a great example of why numbering schemes can't always be trusted. Being a 9600, it's only natural to assume that it's faster than the 9550. Unfortunately this isn't the case. This card is markedly inferior to the 9550, by at least 20% in most benchmarks. Our review sample shipped with 128MB of DDR memory running at 196MHz, but this is crippled by the use of the 64-bit memory bus common to all SE cards.

The core is clocked at 325MHz, which is the same speed as the full blown 9600. Full DirectX9 support is built into the card, and this includes hardware support for both Pixel and Vertex shaders – a great feature to see considering the low cost of the card. Alas this doesn't mean it's great for games using these features, as our two DirectX9 benchmarks both show unplayable frame rates. No prizes for guessing that this card uses a passive cooling setup. It seems that all of the low end cards are now going the fan-less route, making them more suitable for silent PCs.

It also includes the standard 1 x VGA, 1 x S-Video and 1 x DVI output that is found across the entire ATI range.

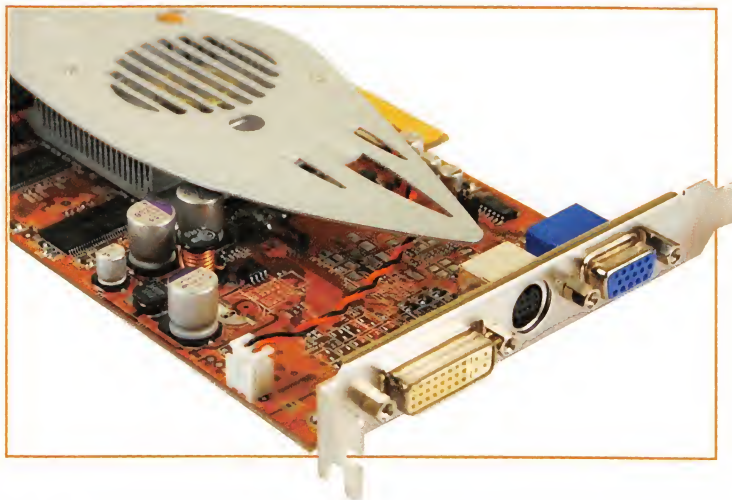


ABIT RADEON 9600

• Price: \$209 • Supplier: Altech www.altech.com.au • Website: www.abit.com.tw

This is the full blooded version of the 9600 series that the hobbled SE originates from. It's basically identical to the SE, with a core speed of 325MHz and memory running around 200MHz, but the use of a 128-bit memory bus gives it a bit of a kick in the performance pants. It uses the exact same graphics processor, thus giving it full DirectX9 compatibility. Considering this, it's surprising to see a fan on the heatsink of this card, tucked away beneath a strange metal cover. By using a wider memory interface, performance rises by around 25%, but the card costs significantly more.

It's still not going to give you great performance in demanding games, but it must be remembered that our FarCry benchmark is run with all details at their highest value. Lowering these should give you a playable experience on this card. The use of 256MB of memory on this card is more for marketing purposes than anything else, as it doesn't have the necessary grunt to make the most of it.

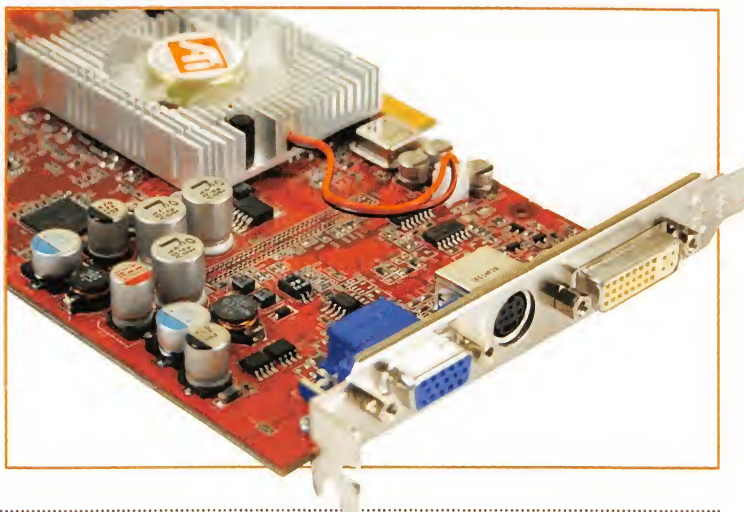


PowerColor RADEON 9600 PRO

• Price: \$230 • Supplier: Australia IT www.australiait.com.au • Website: www.powercolor.com.tw

There are a stack of 9600 cards - four variants, in fact. The PRO is the second fastest of this popular model, and has two major differences that separate it from the plain Jane 9600. The core speed has been bumped up to 400MHz from the original speed of 325MHz, while the memory runs at 300MHz instead of 200MHz. These two frequency increases have resulted in a decent speed boost at the lower resolutions, but the limitations of the overall architecture become apparent at higher resolutions. Our review sample used an AGP 8X interface, while total memory weighed in at 128MB.

By keeping the memory down, PowerColor has managed to keep the price down when compared to the ABit 9600, which has twice as much. It'll only cost you \$20 more for the PRO, which is well worth it considering the healthy performance increase. The move to a higher speed graphics processor means that a heatsink and fan combination is necessary for this card. S-Video, VGA and DVI outputs are also provided.

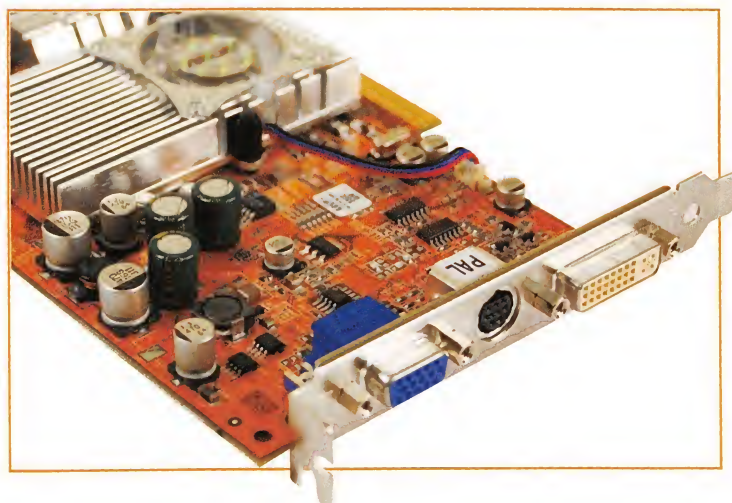


ASUS RADEON 9600 XT

• Price: \$310 • Supplier: Synnex www.synnex.com.au • Website: www.asus.com.au

Until recently, the 9600 XT was the most popular mid-range card in ATI's line up. However, this is set to change with the release of the X800 cards, bumping this down to the lower priced budget bracket. It still offers good value for money, but we're sure that a price drop is on the horizon. This card shares the same architecture as both the 9600 and the 9600 PRO, but increases the chip frequency once more. This time around the core is bumped up to 500MHz, while it retains the same memory frequency of the 9600 Pro, at 300MHz.

Based on this incremental change, it's obvious that the performance difference between this card and the PRO won't be much. After running the benchmarks it soon became apparent that the real world difference was only between 5% and 10%. Therefore we find it hard to justify paying much more for a 9600 XT over the 9600 Pro. 128MB of DDR memory was included on our review sample, while the standard VGA, S-Video and DVI outputs take care of display devices. Due to the fast graphics processor, active cooling is a must with this card.

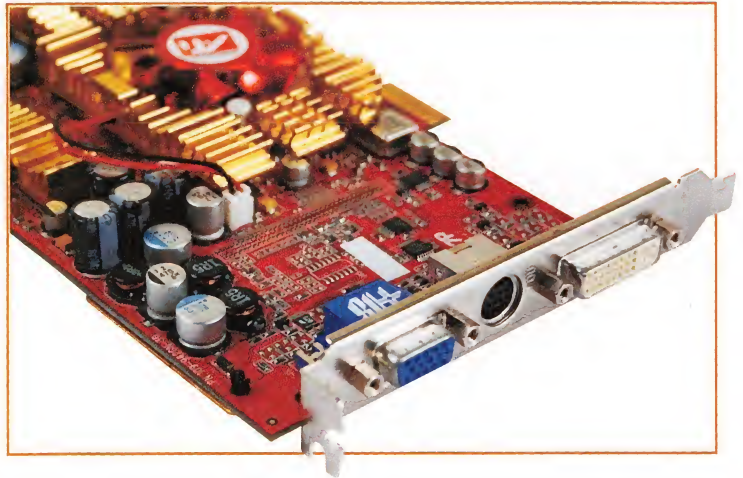


HIS RADEON 9700 PRO

• Price: N/A • Supplier: N/A • Website: www.hightech.com.hk

This was the card that started it all for ATI. Until the 9700 PRO was released, ATI ran a very distant second behind NVIDIA when it came to game performance, but this card changed all that. In fact, ATI's current high end cards use a design that is based on the 9700 PRO. Unfortunately these cards are quite difficult to find these days, as production ended at least 12 months ago. But if you can find one second hand, you'll see that this aging card still has plenty of oomph. Even today's bleeding edge DX9 titles run fairly well on the 9700 PRO, and the performance of the card with antialiasing and anisotropic filtering enabled is nothing to sneeze at.

A large reason for this card's high performance was the introduction of a 256-bit memory bus, which provided oodles of memory bandwidth. It was also one of the first cards to require an additional power connection. Compare the performance of this 128MB card with the 256MB 9600 and it's obvious that more memory doesn't necessarily mean better performance. Both the graphics processor and the memory are covered by heatsinks, but those on the memory tend to be there for cosmetic reasons.

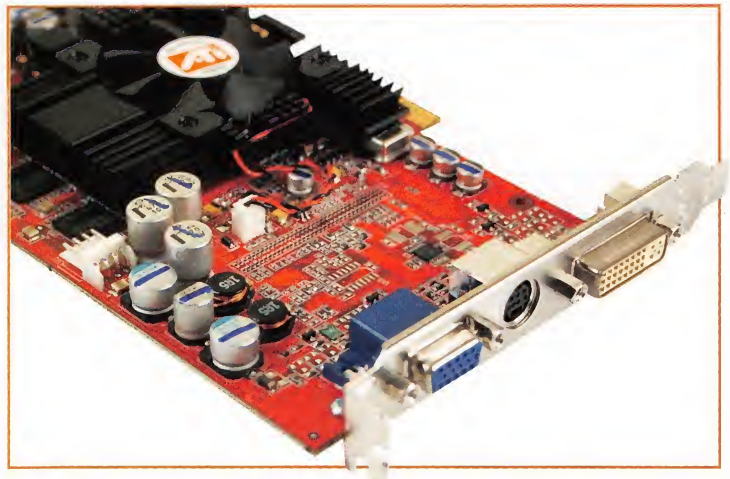


Sapphire RADEON 9800 SE

• Price: \$240 • Supplier: Achieva www.achieva.com.au • Website: www.sapphiretech.com

Hold up. \$240 for a 9800 level card? What's going on here? Surely that can't be right, can it? Ohhhh, there's the reason – it's an SE. By now it's become pretty obvious that SE actually stands for Sloth Edition. I wonder how they've crippled the 9800 version... Well, it appears they've hobbled the speedy 9800 design in two ways. Instead of having 8 pipelines to pummel the pixels, the 9800 SE has to make do with 4. And as we've come to see with the other SE models, the memory interface has taken a beating, dropping from a 256-bit beauty down to a less impressive 128-bit version.

This has left the 9800 SE seriously crippled compared to the other 9800s. In fact, it's even slower than the 9600! In some cases, such as the anisotropic filtering and antialiasing tests run at 1280 x 1024, it was over 25% slower than the 9600. The 9800 SE is more of a marketing exercise than a decent video card. Consumers will be suckered into thinking they've got a high end card for a bargain basement price, but the disappointing performance soon shows this card to be a fraud.

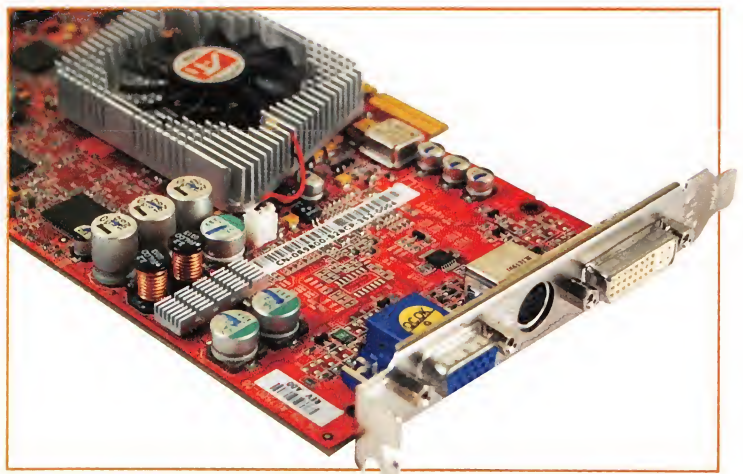


PowerColor RADEON 9800 PRO

• Price: \$389 • Supplier: AustraliaIT www.australiait.com.au • Website: www.powercolor.com.tw

This card highlighted a problem that is common when you have multiple manufacturers all making identical cards. We won't mention the company's name, but we had originally planned to cover a different manufacturer's card for the 9800 PRO category. Then we saw the price of their card – at \$530 it was quite simply a rip-off when compared to the likes of this card. Sure, it had twice as much memory, but as you should now be aware the total amount of memory doesn't mean much, so the two cards performed almost identically.

In the end we decided to present the cheaper card to you, but it's a nice example of why you should shop around for the cheapest card. Unlike the 9800 SE, the 9800 PRO is quite a powerful performer. In fact, when running games that aren't DX9 intensive, or are being run at ridiculously high resolutions with lots of AA and AF, the 9800 PRO offers performance levels that rival that of the fastest card in ATI's range, the X800 PRO. Interestingly, the 9800 PRO performed almost identically to the 9800 XT with the exception of the FarCry benchmark, at a more affordable price.



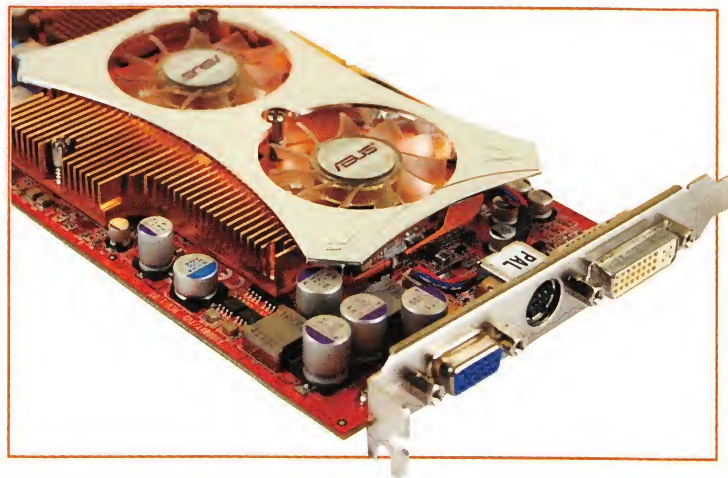
ASUS RADEON 9800 XT

• Price: \$720 • Supplier: Synnex www.synnex.com.au • Website: www.asus.com.au

The jump in price between the 9800 PRO and 9800 XT is not insignificant. In fact, it's almost double the cost. Yet our benchmark results don't show much of a performance difference. If it wasn't for FarCry, we'd be hard pressed to see any difference at all.

We're sure that the reason this card is priced so highly is that ASUS haven't gotten around to dropping the price of it yet. Give it another month and hopefully the price will be more in line with that of the 9800 PRO.

We're a little baffled as to why this card performed so much better than the 9800 PRO in FarCry when all other benchmark results were so close. Even retesting both cards several times saw this gap remain. The only difference between the two chipsets is the speed of the core and the memory - everything else is practically identical. And then it hit us. This card has twice as much memory, at 256MB, than the 9800 PRO. Finally we see an instance when onboard memory makes a difference - when running a demanding game at high resolution on high-end hardware. Hooray!



Gigabyte RADEON X800 PRO

• Price: \$769 • Supplier: Synnex www.synnex.com.au • Website: www.gigabyte.com.tw

For those of you who demand extremely high performance, but don't want to pay close to a grand for your video card, the X800 PRO could be the one to get. It's based on ATI's zippy new X800 chipset, but is limited to 12 pipelines rather than the 16 found on the X800 XT. This doesn't seem to hurt performance too much though, as the only time it fell behind the X800 XT was while running at high resolutions combined with antialiasing and anisotropic filtering, and even then it was only by 10% at most.

This is one of the few instance where a healthy 256MB will lead to a noticeable difference, but it's impossible to test this as these cards don't ship with anything less. It's also interesting to note that these cards use cutting edge GDDR3 memory, which probably accounts for a large chunk of the high asking price. As these cards are so new, we should see substantial price drops over the coming months. This in turn will spur the prices of the 9800 series to drop, which are presently still close to the price of the X800.

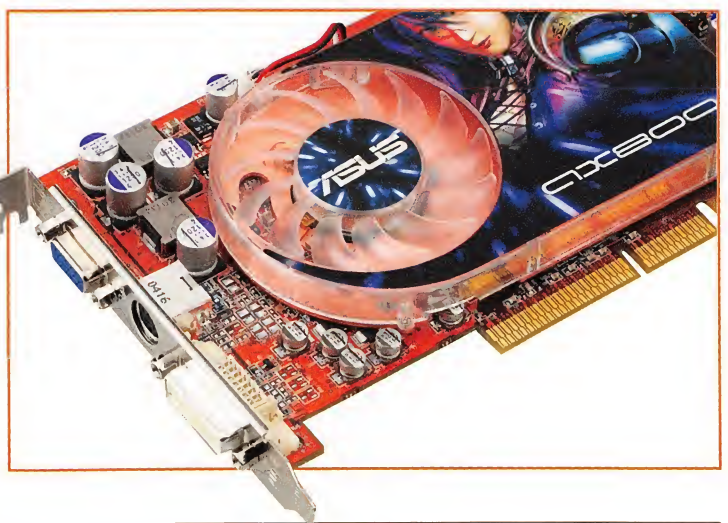


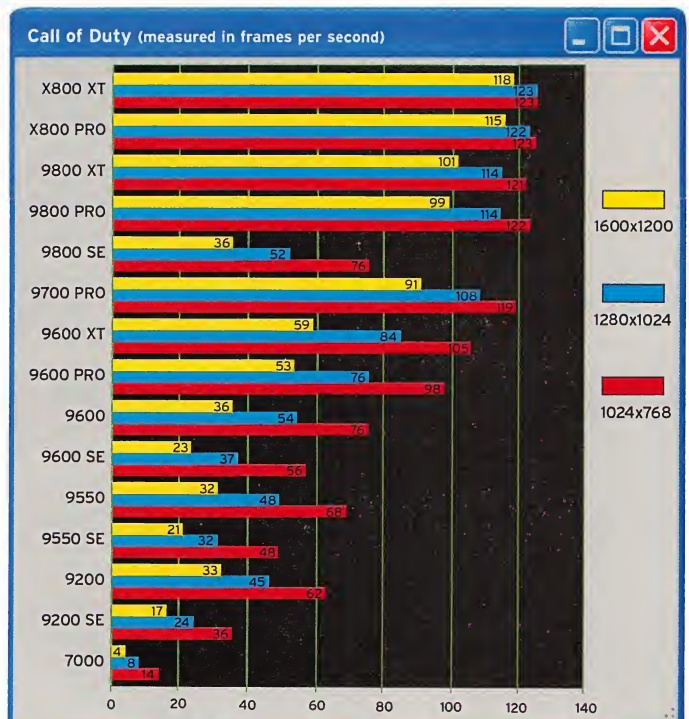
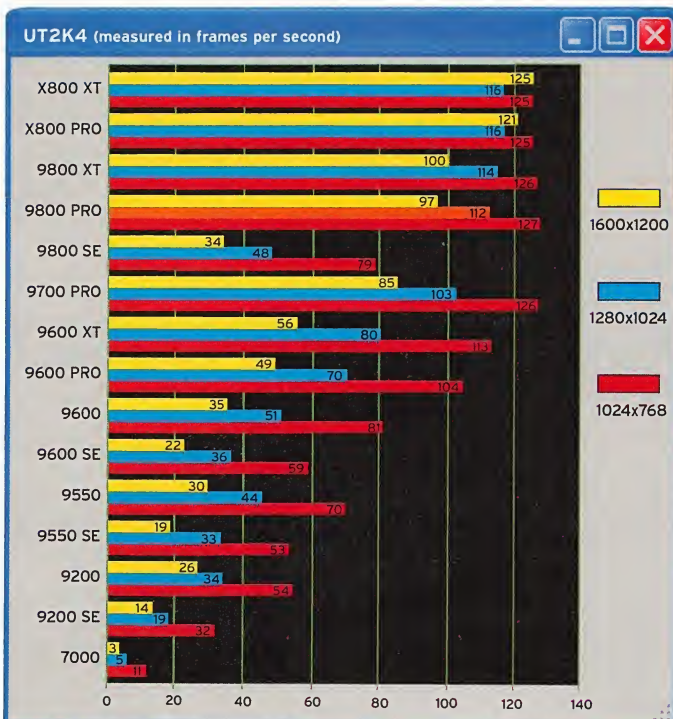
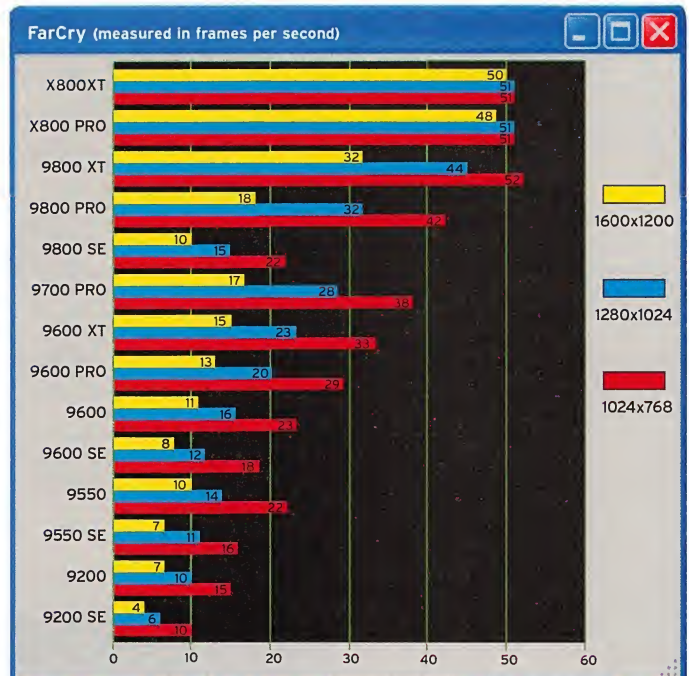
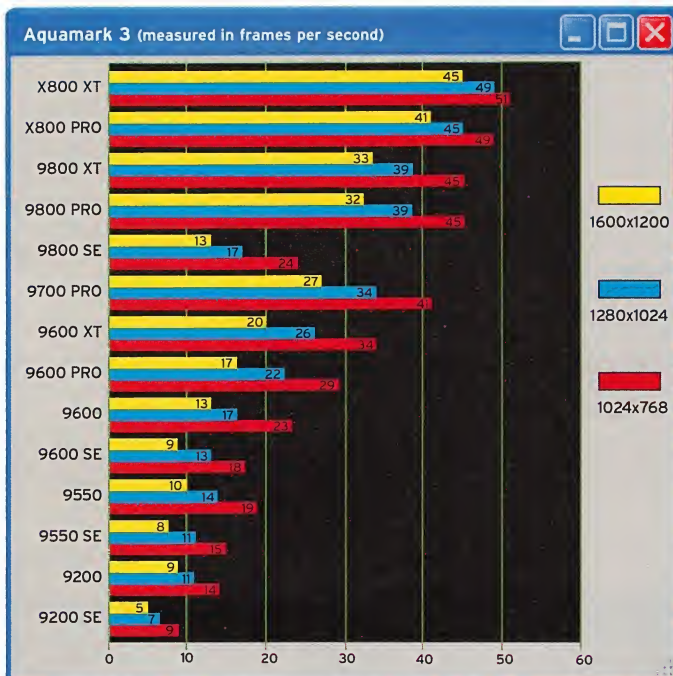
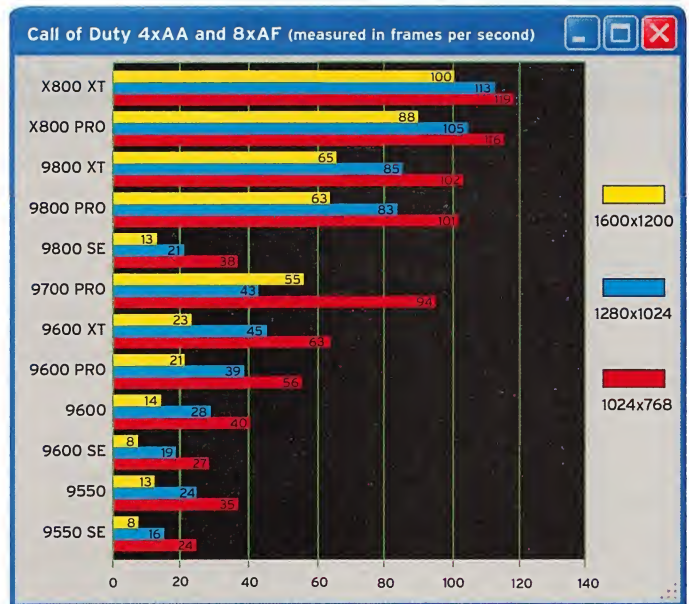
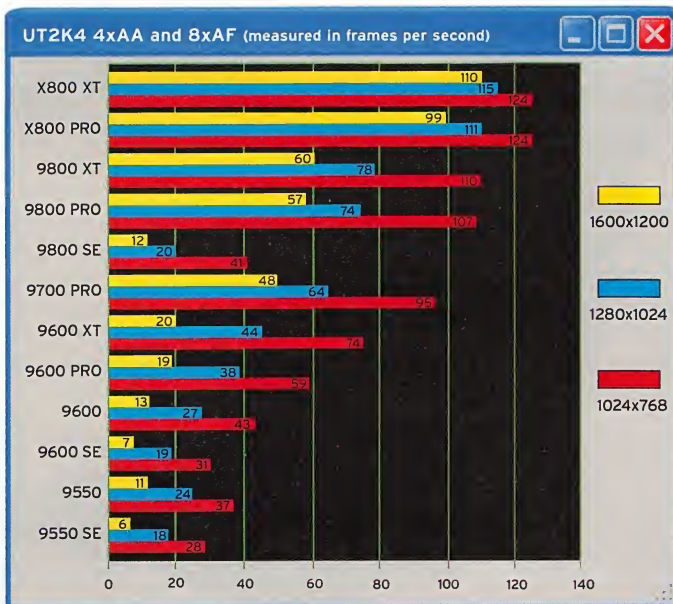
ASUS RADEON X800 XT

• Price: \$899 • Supplier: Synnex www.synnex.com.au • Website: www.asus.com.au

Welcome to the grand poobah of PC graphics. While the technology that the X800 XT is based on may not be as forward looking as NVIDIA's GeForce 6800 Ultra, the X800 XT is unbeatable in today's games, especially when the eye candy is cranked. Which is all that matters. Of course, this performance doesn't come cheaply, with this baby clocking in at close to a grand. Ouch. But its performance is unrivalled. This might not be immediately obvious if you judge it based on its performance while running older games at lower resolutions. In fact, some of the older cards outpace it by a few frames per second under these conditions.

It's only when you're running your games at eye watering resolutions and detail levels, with a stack of pixel shaders and DX9 effects making it look as pretty as possible, that the X800 XT leaves the rest for dead. It's not a massive leap in performance beyond the X800 PRO, but for those who demand the ultimate performance, there is no substitute.





Acer Travelmate 8000

• Price: \$4,499 • Distributor: Acer Australia www.acer.com.au • URL: www.acer.com.au

The Travelmate brand represents Acer's portable range of computers, incorporating both tablet PCs and notebooks. They've been known more for their reliability as work platforms than as mobile ninja machines, but this image has been well and truly shattered by the speedy Travelmate 8000. This new iteration of the Travelmate range is sleek and fully-featured, with plenty of thought having gone into the specifications, guaranteeing solid performance.

Fun bits

The Travelmate 8000 is built upon Intel's Centrino technology, using the latest version of the Pentium M processor, which was known by the codename Dothan. The processor is an Intel Pentium M 1.8GHz with 2MB L2 cache and 400 MHz FSB. The North Bridge is the Intel 855GME chipset, which supports DDR333 RAM (512 MB in this (you can view two separate monitors at once). This connects via a hub bridge to the South Bridge, which is the Intel I/O Controller Hub 4 Mobile (ICH4-M).

This controls the various peripheral interfaces - dual ATA100/66 channels, up to six USB2.0 ports (this model has four), Firewire adaptor, LAN interface (Broadcom Gigabit Extreme), and modem/audio (AC97). The PCI bus supports the wireless connection, which is an IntelPro 2200 BG adaptor. This allows wireless connectivity at speeds up to 54Mb (802.11g protocol), but is also backwards-compatible for the 802.11a and 802.11b protocols. Wireless connectivity is enhanced with integrated Bluetooth. The bus also supports the PCMCIA card reader, and a O2Micro 4-in-1 card reader, supporting the SmartMedia, SD, Memory Stick and MultimediaCard formats.

From the perspective of graphics, the Travelmate 8000 is certainly impressive. To date, Acer have stuck with the integrated Intel Extreme Graphics chipset in their mobile devices. This chipset has never been known for high performance, and devices based on it tend to run games as well as a ninety year old granny runs a 20km marathon. However, Acer have decided to break this tradition, and

this model supports the impressive ATI Mobility Radeon 9700 chip with a separate 128 MB memory buffer. This enables the laptop to pump plenty of pixels, making it suitable for the mobile gamer. The default resolution is an impressive 1400 x 1050, which is nice and crisp on the 15" SXGA LCD screen. The card supports DVI, VGA and S-video out for external viewing.

There is ample storage, with a 60GB Toshiba MK6021GAS UDMA/100 hard drive, sporting a 2MB cache and running at 4200 rpm. The optical drive is a Matshita DVD-RAM UJ-8205 unit, which supports multiple CD and DVD reading/writing formats - CD-R/RW, DVD-R, DVD-ROM, DVD-R/RW, DVD+R/RW and DVD-RAM. Battery performance is enhanced using Intel Speedstep in conjunction with ATI Powerplay technology. Acer boasts up to eight hours battery time, although it's not clear how little activity you'd have to do to achieve that.

Setting up the machine from scratch is an interesting experience, as the majority of peripherals are not supported within the basic Windows XP driver set (don't even try setting up an earlier version of Windows). This resulted in frantic searching across the Acer websites, until the correct drivers were found on an FTP site in Europe. Unfortunately, Acer's websites do not have the same content across global regions, so the process is very manual and fairly hit-and-miss.

Bench me baby

The benchmarks of choice were

SPECIFICATIONS

- Pentium M 1.8 GHz
- Intel 855GME chipset
- 512 MB DDR333 RAM
- 60 GB HDD, 128 MB ATI Mobility Radeon 9700
- 15" SXGA LCD
- AC97 Audio
- Gigabit LAN
- 802.11BG Wireless LAN
- Bluetooth
- 4-in-1 Card Reader
- DVD-RAM
- 4 x USB 2.0
- Firewire
- 56 Kb modem



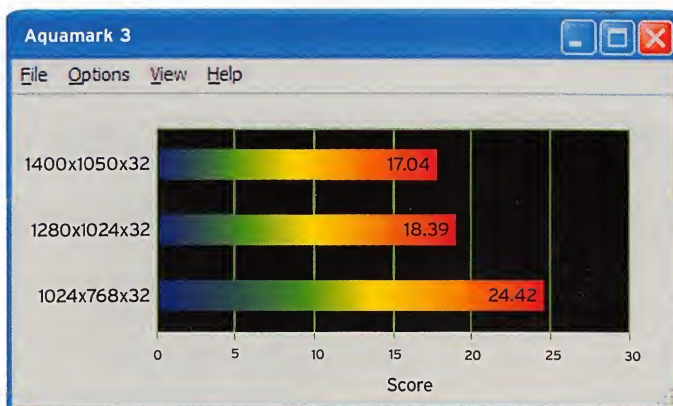
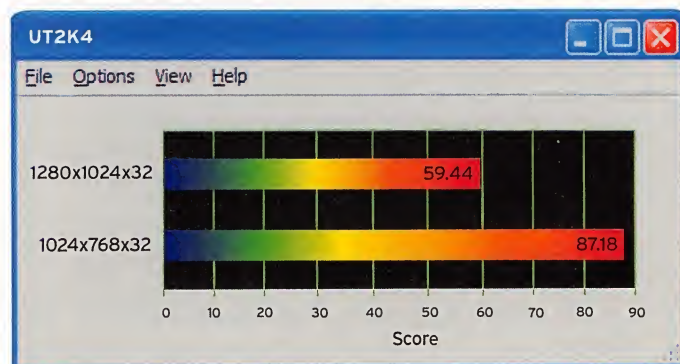
3DMark2001SE, Aquamark 3 and Unreal Tournament 2004. We expected the Travelmate 8000 to perform well, but were pleasantly surprised at just how well it managed. As you can see from the results graphs, it performed at least as well as a low-end gaming platform. Considering the integrated nature of the system, that's impressive. It struggled a little bit with some aspects of the synthetic tests, particularly Aquamark, but managed quite respectable scores, especially considering that all tests were run at maximum detail. Unreal Tournament experience one or two lags at 1280 x 1024, but the framerates were still pretty good, while the speed at 1024 x 768 was fine for a decent game or three. If you don't mind fragging at a lower resolution and on a smaller screen, you could definitely take this laptop to a LAN party. Just be

prepared for everyone to point and laugh. UT2K4 didn't run at the custom resolution of 1400 x 1050.

To test things a little further, we played a few maps of Sacred on it. Gameplay was nice and quick, with just a bit of noticeable refreshing as the screen scrolled. You can't specify screen resolution in Sacred, so it was displaying in full screen mode at 1400 x 1050.

The Travelmate 8000 is fully-featured and highly powered. It's sleek, lightweight and robust. It performed very well in the performance benchmarks, and can handle just about any task you can throw at it, from crunching numbers to pumping pixels. Apart from a complex driver set, there were no problems encountered with it at all.

James Bannan





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Take Your Tablets

Tablet PCs are funky tools for the mobile roadwarrior, packed with features and they look cool too. Just the thing to complement that corporate ego...

The latest generation of tablet PCs are packed to the hilt with goodies, and offer some pretty decent performance thanks to powerful integrated peripherals and Intel Centrino technology. We took a look at two such machines – the Acer Travelmate C110 and the Toshiba Portege M200 – and put them through their paces. We know you're more interested in performance than battery life, so that's what we concentrated our tests on.

The Acer Travelmate is a sweet piece of hardware. It's compact, sleek and works beautifully as a viable alternative to pad and pen. Its ergonomics have been well thought out, being comfortable to use and light enough to carry everywhere. The stylus is very easy to use, and the screen responsiveness was excellent. As a laptop, there's no denying that it's small, but we found ourselves preferring to use it in tablet mode over laptop mode anyway. The screen is certainly small, but runs at a decent resolution (1024 x 768). The Toshiba Portege is a bit bigger and clunkier than the Travelmate. It's not quite as ergonomic, and we found the tablet mode pretty awkward to work with. Given that the keyboard is almost the size of a standard laptop and that the laptop mode is easier to work with, the tablet mode seemed a bit of a waste of time. The most annoying thing was the stylus – it arrived with a pre-broken clip and

Toshiba Portege M200

• Price: \$4,299 • Distributor: Toshiba • URL: www.toshiba.com.au

SPECIFICATIONS

- Pentium M 1.4GHz
- 512 MB RAM
- Toshiba 60GB HDD
- 12.1" SXGA TFT
- 32/64MB GeForce FX Go5200
- SoundMax Audio
- 56kB modem
- Intel Pro/100 VE Ethernet
- Intel Pro/Wireless LAN 2100 3B 802.11b
- USB2.0
- VGA-out
- SD card reader
- PCMCIA



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kept falling out of the chassis. Sounds like a minor point, but picking it up five times in a row every time the machine moved got real boring real quick. The Acer's stylus, by comparison, wouldn't fall out even if you shook the case.

Head-to-Head

Tablets aren't known for their graphic/gaming performance, but these machines have pretty good specs, so the results had the potential to be interesting. The first and most obvious result is that the Toshiba creamed the Acer, scoring up to double in some benchmarks. Why? Simple – the

Acer's underpowered graphics card. The Intel Extreme graphics chip simply can't cope with the real time rendering load placed on it by demanding applications, whereas the GeForce FX Go5200 is a much grunter piece of GPU power. Given the inherent restrictions of underpowered integrated graphics chips, the tests were done using maximum and minimum settings to see what difference it made. The biggest differences were in the Aquamark and UT2K4 tests – especially Aquamark. Bumping up intensive detailing like lighting, shading and anisotropic filtering also cranks up

the number of polygons and without the necessary dedicated architecture, the framerate drops right away.

The Acer really isn't capable of smoothly rendering complex graphics on the fly, so it's unlikely to become a new feature to LAN parties. To be honest, neither is the Toshiba, BUT at minimum graphic detail the performance is quite acceptable. In spite of the obvious performance differences and the Toshiba's superiority, it's actually quite difficult to recommend one machine over the other. The Toshiba clearly carries more processing power and storage, but the Acer functions much better as a mobile device, which is really the whole point of a tablet PC. At the end of the day, tablet PCs aren't set to revolutionise the gaming world just yet, but they're certainly getting better. For the price, you could get a high-powered laptop, or a seriously high-powered desktop. However, if you need a tablet for work reasons anyway, isn't it great to know that you can work on your frag count in between meetings. If it's performance you're after, the Portege is your baby, packing a fair punch. However, if you really want to use your tablet PC as a tablet PC, then go with the Travelmate. It can't crank up the juice, but it's tidy, small and a pleasure to work with.

James Bannan

Acer Travelmate C110

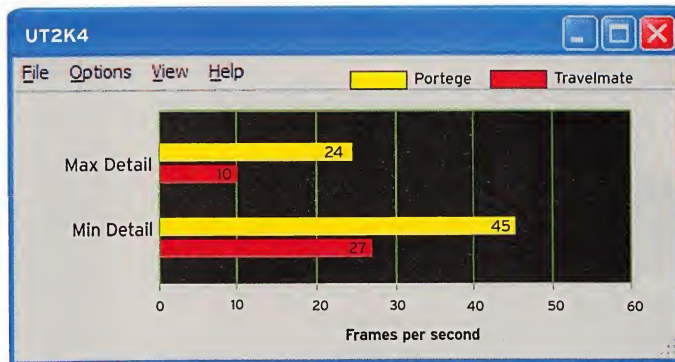
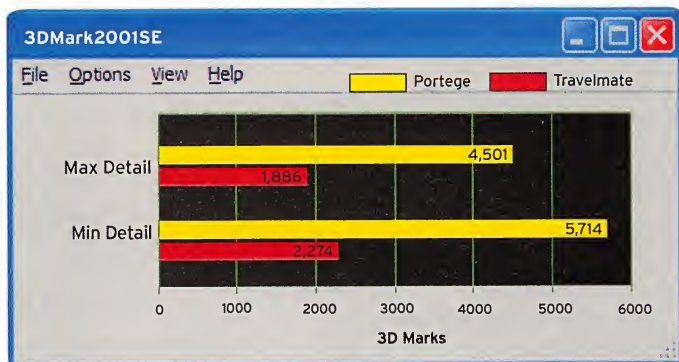
• Price: \$4,000 • Distributor: Acer Aust • URL: www.acer.com.au

SPECIFICATIONS

- Pentium M 1GHz
- 512 MB RAM
- Hitachi Travelstar 40GB HDD
- 10.4" XGA TFT
- 64MB Intel 82852/82855 GM/GME Graphics
- Crystal WDM AC'97 Audio
- 56kB modem
- Bluetooth
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The Whole Shebang

PCI Express has arrived at last. Not to mention DDR2 and Intel's new Socket design. Jason Brown is tonight's referee for this much anticipated match-up between the old and the new.

I had planned to batter you with boxing puns and Rocky 4 references as I observed this Intel title fight between the old champ (the 865 Springdale Chipset) and the newcomer, the 915P, aka Alderwood. Fortunately for you, at the absolute last minute, we were lucky enough to get our hands on one of the new Intel 925X Grantsdale chipped reference boards to boot. Maybe I should switch to Rock-n-Roll wrestling analogies to cater for the tag-team arrangement... or maybe not. Contestants, to your corners please!

The weigh in

In the red corner, we have the all new MSI 915P board (thanks MSI - www.msi.com.tw), bringing a slew of new technologies to the mobo ring. DDR2, PCI-Express, 24 pin power connections, and of course the new 915P Northbridge and ICH6R Southbridge combo, all cruisin' to do some bruising'. The 915P is the spiritual successor to our veteran 865 battler in the blue corner, while the 925X is basically a memory tweaked version of the 915P aimed at the enthusiasts.

It's been a while since we've

market simultaneously. What's more, I've never seen a change where legacy products have been totally abandoned. When we shifted between EDO, SDRAM, and DDR memory types there was always a transitional stage where some mobos had slots for the soon to be obsolete tech. When AGP burst onto the scene, PCI cards were still supported. Even the shift to ATX power supplies meant many boards and PSU's did double duty for a while. But these boards dismiss their ancestors without remorse - clearly the gloves are off. There's something to be said for this approach. After all, legacy support does not make for the highest performance, but to use either of these two new boards you'll need a stack of new gear. Specifically, a new CPU, PSU, Video Card, and new DDR2 RAM. Actually, concerning the PSU, scratch that. With the 915P, you may be able to get by with a standard ATX PSU, but it's a case of suck it and see. Some manufacturers are planning to release DDR compatible boards for the new chipsets, as the



These plastic lugs stand between you & armageddon

older DDR memory if the manufacturer deems this the best memory. So if you've got a healthy reserve of RAM, you'll probably want to look towards those boards (we'll have a review of a Gigabyte model next month that is happy to take both DDR and DDR-II). As a result this new platform and its myriad of new technologies better be an all singing, all dancing superstar for us to recommend such a massive upgrade.

Round One: Physical layout

Casting your 'eye of the tiger' over the both the 915P and 925X motherboards you'll notice tiny little PCI like slots where you'd normally stick your Audigy sound card. These are PCI Express x1 slots. You'll have a very hard time finding any cards to fit these receptacles at the moment, but given time anything that ordinarily would fit into a PCI slot will hang here. Thankfully, the MSI board includes inbuilt 7.1 channel audio support (see boxout), GigaBit Ethernet and IEEE 1394 ports. There's a

THE SOLE BENEFIT OF PCI EXPRESS

Right now PCI Express makes absolutely no performance difference for gamers, which is just as we'd expected. However, the story changes if you edit High Definition digital video. We've seen demos of HD running side by side on AGP and PCI Express systems, and the PCI Express system has double the frame rates of the AGP system. Which is great news for the seven people in Australia who edit HD material.

communications slot for a wireless LAN or Bluetooth card as well.

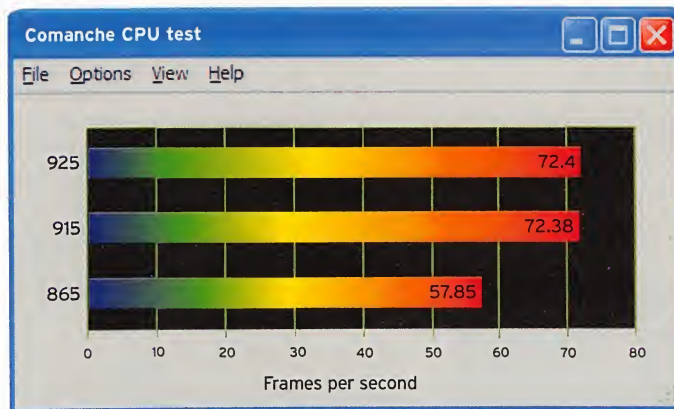
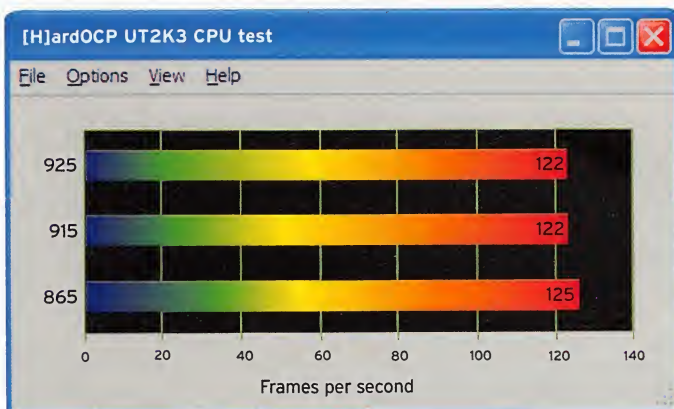
You'll also notice the new PCI Express x16 slot, which is where your shiny new PCI Express graphics card belongs; you'll need one as neither of these boards has onboard graphics. The key principle of PCI Express is to provide more pathways between devices, rather than one specific choke point. Sounds good in theory, but it's probably not going to make for huge performance increases anytime soon, especially from a gamer's perspective.

The CPU socket is a radical new

SAVED BY THE BELL(S & WHISTLES)

Brag that your integrated sound chip is just as good as a sound card, and someone is likely to beat you up, but with this baby, you can get away with it. Intel's new High Definition Audio 'Azalia' technology is a huge advancement over the older AC97 integrated audio. Its top billing spec is the ability to handle the lofty requirements of the DVD-Audio movement. This standard that requires hardware be capable of playing multi-channel surround sound encoded at 24Bit, and 96kHz sampling rates. Technically, this board can play audio sampled at 32Bit resolutions, but nobody's ears can detect it as being superior to 24Bit, except maybe the family pooch. It also handles 192kHz sampling rates, but

only those with SpideySense (like Bennett) can appreciate it. Our listening tests (response, noise, range, distortion, etc) alone put it close to Audigy2 territory. Not bad for a freebie! And if this level of quality, with the addition of 7.1 surround isn't enough, the internal architecture is also extremely impressive. It splits audio streams so that multiple applications can utilise the sound capabilities simultaneously. It also has the audio codec integrated into the integration! This lessens the load on the CPU, and removes the stigma attached to integrated audio. It means games like FarCry and friends won't stutter like a certain shy (or Sly) boxer when they're a-courtin' Adrien! Did I mention it sounds ace too?



design. The Prescott CPU's don't have pins in the usual sense. Rather, they have tiny metal pads which make contact with extremely short pins on the motherboard. The chip is held in place by a firm clamping lever. This lever holds down a metal lid, almost like a coffin, trapping the CPU in place. The setup is so tight that if you insert the CPU incorrectly, there's a good chance that the clamping will render the socket useless, meaning you'll need to replace the entire motherboard. A risky design in itself, but once you factor in Intel's heatsink implementation, which we'll soon get to, I'm not sure this design can go the distance.

Apart from the new slots and socket, the physical layout is a fairly standard design. Northbridge up the top, Southbridge down the bottom. Enough room to get your DDR2 in and out without busting your video card, and two legacy PCI slots included so you can still use any niche, irreplaceable cards you're hanging on to. There's no AGP slot, but you probably suspected that.

What is nice to see is the emergence of 4 channel SATA interfaces. Now SATA is a viable alternative to IDE, as you at least have enough sockets for the slightly above average gamer's storage drive requirements. It also introduces Intel's new Matrix RAID technology, which is darn impressive. It allows you to run both RAID modes 1 and 0 concurrently using only two drives, albeit using multiple partitions. Nevertheless, providing security and performance simultaneously is a great feature.

SPECIFICATIONS

- Northbridge: Intel 915PP Express
- Southbridge: ICH6R
- CPU Socket: Prescott LGA775
- RAM: DDR2 (400/533/667), Max 4GB
- Slots: 1 PCI Express x16, 2 PCI Express x1, 3 PCI
- SATA/IDE: Supports 4 SATA/4 IDE devices
- Onboard: 8 Channel Realtek audio, 2.5GB Ethernet, 3 x Firewire

OVERCLOCKING

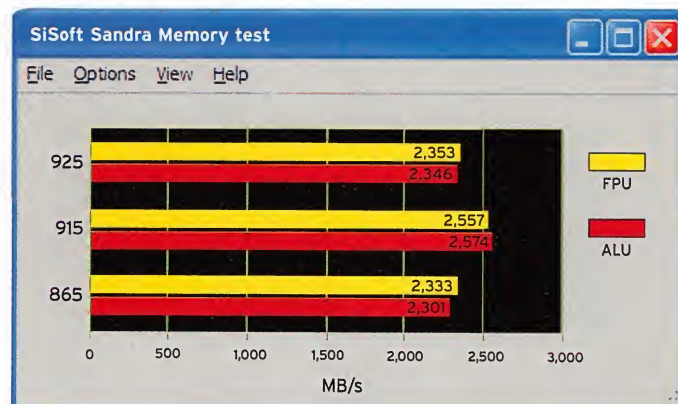
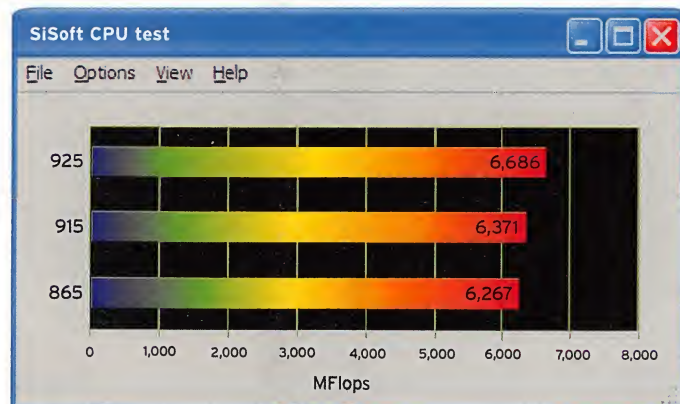
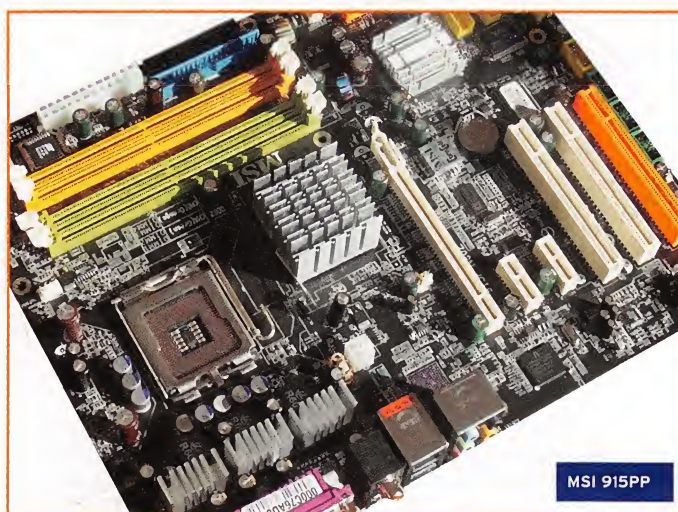
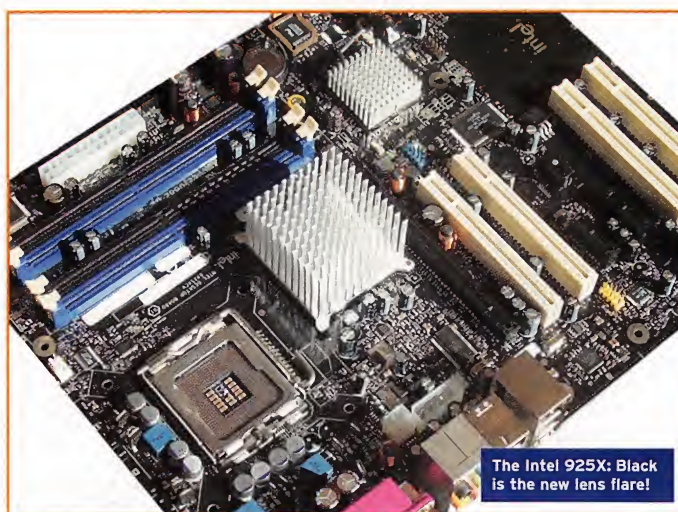
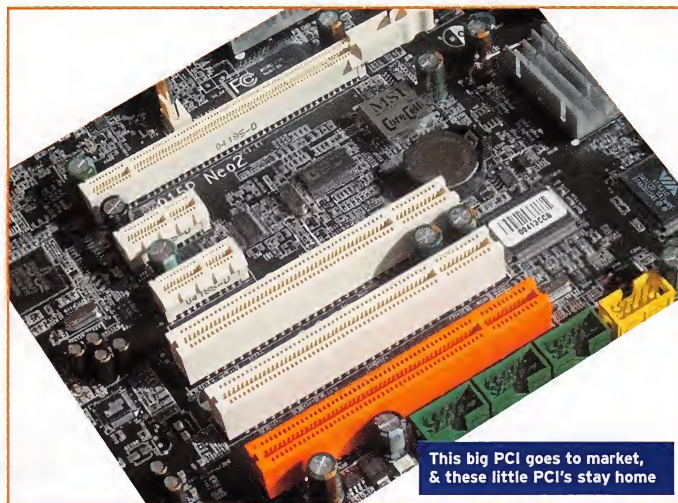
It appears that Intel has blocked overclocking with this chipset. We asked them if this was true, and got the reply "from time to time, Intel may choose to implement functionality that helps to ensure that the Intel product experience is not degraded by those who may try to run our products out of spec." - which is basically Intel's way of saying yes without actually saying yes. Reports from the Interweb show that these boards are limited to a meagre 10% overclock, a far cry from the 50% we easily extracted from the 865 and 875 chipsets. It remains to be seen if board manufacturers can get around Intel's overclocking blocks.

This round is a draw. The lack of legacy support and the high cost of upgrades hurts the 915P/925X boards, but the support for the new tech is a well placed sucker punch.

Round Two: Putting it together

I've already mentioned the radical CPU coffin, but the Heatsink mounting method used for the Socket 775 on both the 915P and the 925X board is... disturbing. The reason? There's no frame to fasten your heatsink to! It literally fastens directly into holes in the PCB (Printed Circuit Board) itself! The restraints aren't too different to the nylon binding posts that you might use to lock the motherboard down into your case, except that they have a mechanical locking action to them. This could be a mistake in the range of "ooh, isn't this RAMBUS idea nice" proportions. If the number of cracked PCBs doesn't put the kybosh on it, then the number of 'Severed fingers resulting from undoing the restraints next to heatsinks fitted with Blades of Death +10' lawsuits, will. You've been warned.

Plugging in the new PSU is simple. The new 24 pin plug is installed the same as usual, although the manual suggests that the standard 20 pin units can be used, with repercussions unclear. The extra 4 pins provide an additional 12 and 5 volt rail, for their own inscrutable purposes. The DDR2 slots in the same as



DDR, but the notch is in a different offset, and there's a few extra pins (240 as opposed to DDR's 184), so obviously you won't be inserting the incorrect type. By the way, Altech (www.altech.com.au) deserves special thanks for providing the Antec PSU and the Corsair DDR2 RAM so we could get this gear going.

Windows wise, the switch to 915P and 925X was not as smooth as it could be. When the install failed it was hard to know where to point the finger, given the amount of new tech introduced. At first, the SATA arrangement provided via the new Southbridge was the primary suspect. However, it turned out to be a problem with the integrated components hanging off the Southbridge, not the SATA interface. Disabling them in the BIOS for the duration of the install process, and patching them up after the initial install got them sorted.

This round belongs to the old 865 Rockster I'm afraid.

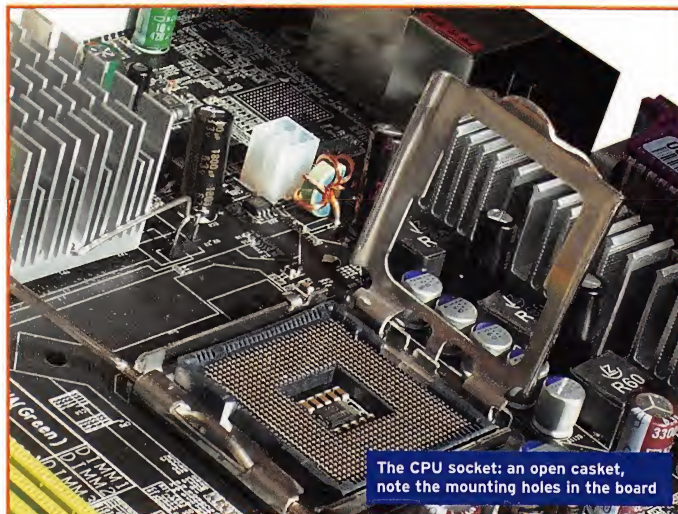
Round Three: General Performance

This round is all about what sort of general performance increases you can expect by switching up to the 915P/925X chipsets and Socket 775. And what an interesting street fight it is! In both cases, we're sticking with 3.4GHz CPU's, with the 915P and 925X fitted with

the nice new Prescott. We're using an Nvidia FX5700 in the older board. At the time of writing, there's not much to choose from for PCI Express graphics cards, but we were able to nab a FX5750 PCI Express version which is basically identical to the 5700 bar the PCI Express interface. We're also running two sticks of 256 MB RAM in dual channel mode in all boards, running at the By Spd setting in the BIOS.

Early in the round, in a straight out slugfest, SiSoft Sandra was used to measure the CPU's integer and floating point performance. From a pure number crunching perspective, the results were almost identical with no significant difference, although the 925X had approximately 6% improvement in the Floating-Point domain. Not a huge difference, but considering it's the same CPU frequency in both cases, it's worthy of mention.

The memory match-up was tipped to make for some exciting viewing, however it failed to ignite the crowd. The DDR2 equipped 915P setup improved upon the old 865 by around 8%, but in an upset, the 925X's results were almost identical to the DDR equipped 865. This is baffling, as the 925X is supposed to have better performance than the 915P, but we're putting it down to early



There is no way in hell that we can justify upgrading to a 915P or 925X-based platform if you're running a relatively current system

BIOS versions. Unfortunately DDR2 didn't achieve any significant speed improvements. However, the beauty of this stuff lies in its future ability to ramp up in speed.

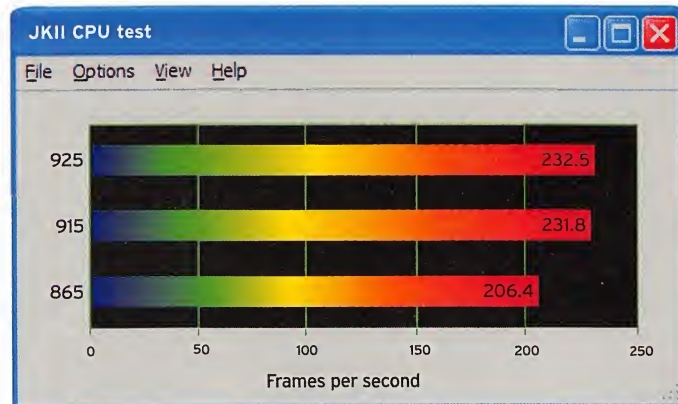
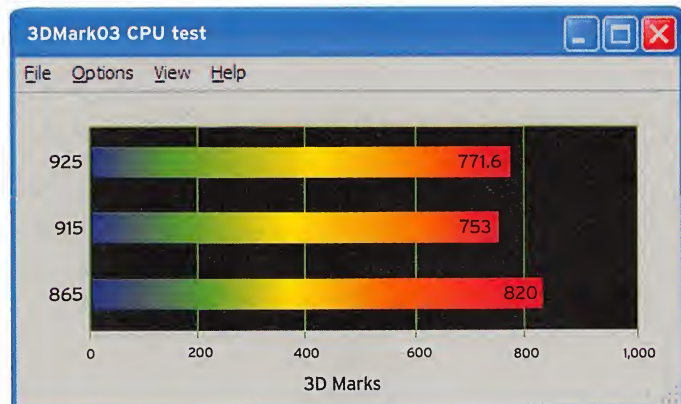
The fight then settled into a swinging match. Check the tables and you'll see that using the real world CPU benchmarks for Comanche 4 and Jedi Knight 2, the new chipsets were the winner, landing plenty of punches. The 915P/925X chipsets, with practically uniform scores, solidly beat out the older 865. As the PC Express card is a slightly slower card, you can safely conclude that the increases are mostly thanks to the new chipset.

Of course, every bout has its ups and downs and this round was no exception. Just when we thought the champ was down for the count, in the 3DMark 2003 CPU and UT2003 optimised tests the old 865 edged out the new contenders by an intriguing margin. This round has to be declared a draw, thanks to the late upset.

And at the final bell...

From what we can gather, the 925X is only fractionally faster than the 915P chipset. And both of these are only slightly faster than the old 865 chipset, coming in at the same speed as we'd expect from the 875 chipset. This is a major disappointment. We've got a swag of new technologies, all of which equate to a non-existent performance increase. Whoopdy Do! As a result, there is no way in hell that we can justify upgrading to a 915P or 925X-based platform if you're running a relatively current system already, unless you spend 90% of your time editing High Definition video, in which case PCI Express will double your performance. It's just not worth spending several thousand dollars for no game performance increase. However, all of these technologies have one significant benefit over their predecessors - headroom. They're all going to rise in speed over the coming months and years, and only then will they be worth your hard earned.

Jason Brown





Thermaltake Coolall Your Life



Coolall Your Life

Purepower

TWV 480

Total Watts Viewer - Take Control



Thermaltake



TWV-480W

- 480 watt power supply available with or without PFC
- Application for AMD™ and Intel® system including Pentium 4
- Feel the change of power consumption while the system works under different load conditions
- Get real control of your system by reading the values reflected by TWV
- Take fast action and necessary measures while the system is working abnormally
- 80x80x25mm case fan, adjustable fan speed, 1300 rpm ~ 3000 rpm.
- Enclosed 20-24pin adaptor cable application for BTX & server motherboard
- Dual serial ATA (Advanced Technology Attachment) power connectors
- Noise : 17 dBA at 1300 rpm

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HARDCANO 12



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E-mail: sales@thermaltake.com.au



Bennett Ring PowerTools

While it would make our jobs a heck of a lot easier if we could review hardware based on the shininess of the packaging it arrives in, we're pretty sure our beloved readers are a little more interested in how the hardware actually performs. Which is why we have the PC PowerPlay PowerTools - batteries not included.

If you're anything like us, you probably don't give a rat's arse if Word will open three seconds faster on the new Pentium 64,

or if you can compress a zip file more speedily using DDR6-8000 memory. Nope, this is PowerPlay, so it's all about how well your games will perform.

Our PowerTools are broken into two categories, videocard tests and CPU/motherboard/memory tests, and you'll notice that most of these are based on real world game engines. We spoke to Intel, AMD, NVIDIA and ATI about which games to use to benchmark our hardware, and

after tossing out their biased recommendations settled on the following applications for the majority of our tests.

Actually, we used the benchmarks that competing companies both agreed upon, to help make sure our tests can't be accused of favouring one flavour of hardware over another.

Of course, every now and then a unique piece of hardware will arrive that can't be tested properly using these

applications, and in these circumstances we'll use the most appropriate benchmarking software.

We also use test benches (a fancy way of saying a PC outside of a case, waiting to electrocute unsuspecting hardware noobs), standardised hardware platforms that ensure our benchmark results can be compared to each other month after month. Check out the box below to see what components we use in our test benches.

CPU Tests

3D Mark03 CPU test

Nobody can deny that this CPU test is a nice way to give processors a thorough workout. And hey, it's easy to use and free - 'nuff said.

Jedi Knight 2

We couldn't ignore a benchmark that includes lightsabres. We run this test at low resolution (640x480), with texture details lowered, and geometry details maxed out.

[H]ardOCP Unreal Tournament 2003 test 2.1

We run the CPU test of this benchmark at low resolution, and it's one of the finest indicators of CPU performance available.

Comanche 4

It sucked as a game, but as a CPU/motherboard/memory benchmark this is a beauty. We run at 640x480 resolution to make sure it's the CPU that's carrying the load.

Videocard tests Aquamark3

Aquanox isn't the most popular game, but the engine behind it

makes for a great benchmarking application. We crank all the settings to the highest.

Call of Duty

OpenGL is on the verge of extinction, but there's one very important game that still uses it. Call of Duty is the premiere WWII themed shooter, and drags the Q3 engine into the 21st century with the use of pretty pixel shaders. All image quality settings are maxed.

FarCry

This is a game that illustrates just how advanced PC graphics have become. With more DirectX 9 effects than a Microsoft graphics lab, it's also one of the more intensive games around. Which makes it a great benchmark! We test with all image quality settings maxed.

UT2K4

Considering the engine is a couple of years old, UT2K4's engine still looks mighty fine. It's not quite as demanding as FarCry, but it'll still give your GPU a bit of a lashing. As well as running this with all image quality settings maxed, it's also the game we use to test antialiasing and anisotropic filtering performance.

TEST BENCHES

Intel Test Bench (x2) Intel Pentium 4 2.6C

HIS RADEON 9700 PRO
www.akatech.com.au
Corsair 2 x 256MB XMS3200LL
DDR400
www.altech.com.au
Seagate Barracuda 7200.7 160GB
ATA100 Hard Drive
www.seagate.com
ABIT IS7 865PE motherboard
www.altech.com.au
TOPOWER 470W PSU
www.auspcmarket.com.au
Mitsubishi Diamond View
2115e 21" monitor
www.mitsubishi.com.au
Microsoft multimedia keyboard
and optical mouse
www.microsoft.com.au
Windows XP Professional
www.microsoft.com.au

AMD Test Bench (x1) AMD Athlon XP 2600+

HIS RADEON 9700 PRO
www.akatech.com.au
Corsair 2 x 256MB XMS3200LL
DDR400
www.altech.com.au
Seagate Barracuda 7200.7 160GB
ATA100 Hard Drive
www.seagate.com
ABIT NF7-S
www.altech.com.au
TOPOWER 470W PSU
www.auspcmarket.com.au
Mitsubishi Mitsubishi Diamond
View 2115e 21" monitor
www.mitsubishi.com
Microsoft multimedia keyboard
and optical mouse
www.microsoft.com.au
Windows XP Professional
www.microsoft.com.au

Image Quality testing:

We also use a Sony G520 21" CRT monitor for the image quality testing of video cards.



www.akatech.com.au



www.corsairmicro.com



www.auspcmarket.com.au



www.intel.com



www.abit.com.tw



www.amd.com



www.seagate.com



www.hightech.com.hk



www.altech.com.au



www.sony.com.au



www.mitsubishi-electric.com.au

James Bannan

Decrypt

The internet is filled with terms ranging from the illogical to the bizarre. We run the DeCrypt engine across a few of them.

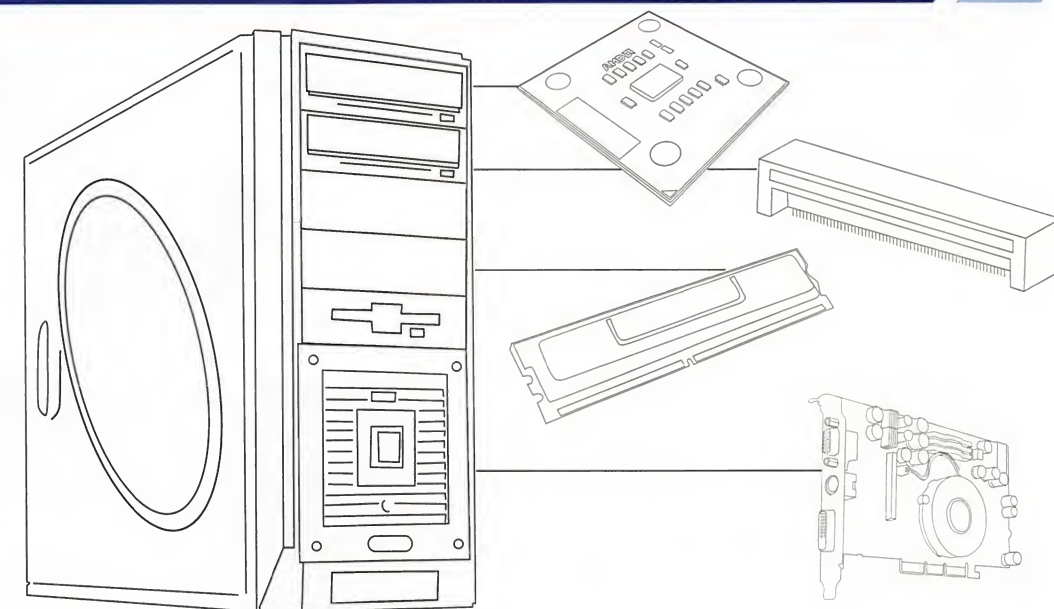
Banner You've all seen them - brightly coloured, often animated ads running across the full length of the screen. Notice how many of them are linked to porn sites? What's more, they chew up your bandwidth. These irritants are provided to sites as a sort of funding - "you put our banner on your site, and we'll pay you".

Chatroom A hangout for desperados, weirdos, deviants, pubescents and people you wouldn't talk to in a pub. Yes, that might sound harsh, but try hanging out in one for a few hours and you'll see what we mean.

Cookie A small piece of data, usually in the form of a text file, which is saved to your computer when you visit a particular site. It allows a certain level of interactivity, such as the site remembering your logon details (username/password), the last time you logged in and so on. The problem with cookies is that they can also be used to track your online habits, and you can find yourself the target of unsolicited promotional emails (or worse). Most browsers give you the ability to clear out your cookies regularly, or set your security settings so that you never get them. You lose out on the warm fuzzies of a website welcoming you back, but you gain anonymity, which is no bad thing.

Emoticon Popular in real time chat and SMS messaging, "emoticon" is a cut-down form of "emotional icon", otherwise known as a "smiley". They're just arrangements of punctuation marks laid out to look like a smiley face, or a grumpy face, and this is somehow supposed to add emotion to whatever it is you're writing. It's a short step from "through" to "thru", and "shall I compare thee to a summer's day" to "J".

FTP File Transfer Protocol - works in a similar way to web pages, which are built on HTTP (Hyper Text Transfer



Protocol), but instead of passing text-based code to a browser, FTP passes file structures. This allows you to view the contents of available online folders in a Windows Explorer fashion.

L337 Pronounced "leet", this is short for "elite". This is the self-branded tag for the underground section of the online community who deal with hardcore gaming, light piracy or hacking (or at least, THINK they do). If you're not L337, you're either a noob or a lamer. Sorry, n00B or lAm3R.

L337-speak The belief that a failure to adhere to the rules of spelling or punctuation marks you out as a cool rebel against the system man, like yeah, you know?

NTP News Transfer Protocol - the backbone of newsgroups, which are hybrids between bulletin boards and email systems. You subscribe to a particular newsgroup like alt.binaries.buttnguggets.for.jesus (this DOES exist), and you can access the latest breaking news threads via your browser or mail client.

Popup The bane of the net surfer.

These are unsolicited browser windows which are launched by code on the page you actually want to get to. They pop up (hence their name - groovy huh?) over the page you want to look at, causing much wailing and gnashing of teeth. The really nasty ones are the popups which spawn OTHER popups, which spawn even more when you close them down. Websites that incorporate popups need to be subject to some kind of draconian law, preferably involving boiling oil and tweezers. Luckily there are lots of applications dedicated to stopping popups in their tracks, like the Google Toolbar, and Windows XP SP2.

PrOn Also known as "booty" and "joy", this is actually L337-speak for pornography. The belief being that if you spell it differently and pronounce it "pron", it will bypass the best firewalls known to man and NO-ONE will know what you're talking about! Haha!

Proxy This is a setting in your browser which is important if you access the internet within an

infrastructure which has a dedicated proxy server. This handles all requests to the internet and filters those requests based on particular rules, like content management and access control. Some proxies can be automatically detected and configured in the browser, whereas others need to be manually set.

SSL Secure Socket Layer. This is a security feature commonly used for HTTP traffic. It encrypts the traffic, making it harder to be intercepted and stolen. It's commonly used for secure business transactions like internet banking. Any website you go to which has an HTTPS prefix instead of HTTP is using SSL.

URL User Requested Link. This is a Link which you, the User, Requests. It's just a link. Click on one and you have interacted with a URL.

VBB Versatile Bulletin Board. This is a free system for creating bulletin boards using PHP4 and MySQL. Lots of boards and forums are springing up all over the Internet using this system, which is cute, customisable and quite powerful.



Pentium4 3.0 at 3.56hz with warranty!

\$3699 inc GST

\$2199 inc GST

XtremeOverclockers

Viper1337- CPU: Pentium4 800Mhz FSB - 3.0Ghz at 3.5Ghz
18" UMAX TelevisionTFT. Case, K/Board, Mouse: Thermaltake Lanfire
Asus Radeon 9800XT 256mb. Modem, Speakers, DVD Combo Burner
Ram: Corsair Twin-X DDR PC3200 512mb Low Lat. Kit. Win XP-Pro
HDD: Dual 80GB SATA Drives in Raid-0, 160GB Superfast Retrieval.
Asus P4C800DXE. Gamers Dream PC, Built by serious Gamers.

COBRA- CPU: Pentium4 800Mhz FSB-2.8Ghz at 3.3Ghz
DVD-BURNER. Asus Mainboard P4P800. 15" UMAX TFT Monitor
512MB DDR RAM(Dual Channel). 80GB S-ATA Hard Drive.
X-SONIC Cobra Case, Deluxe K/Board, Mouse and Speakers.
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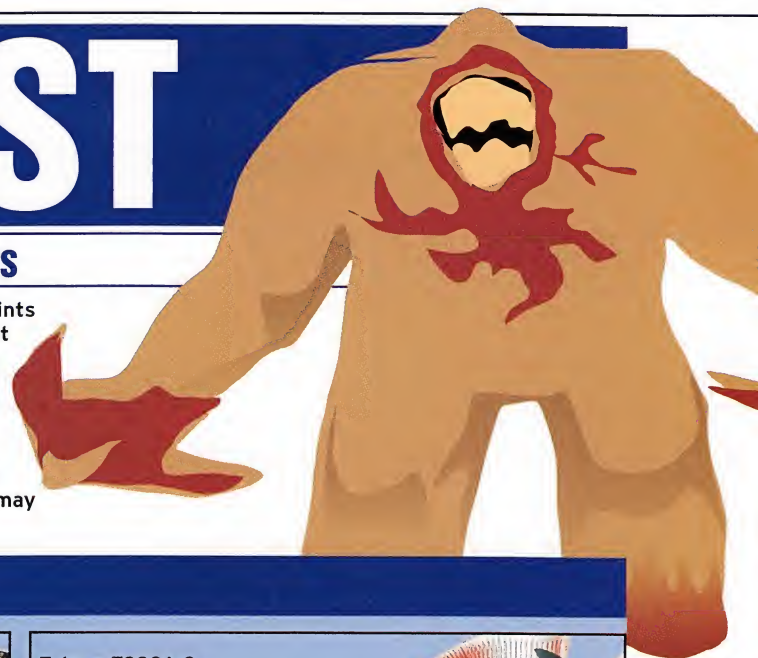
THE BEAST



In association with Altech Computers

Welcome to PCPP's Beast page, where we give you the blueprints for three very different PCs, each catering to a different wallet thickness and/or level of technical knowledge.

For those with extra phat, well padded money holders, look no further than the Beast. You'll be hard pressed to find a faster machine, but you'll pay through the nose for the privilege. Then there's the Mutant, for those who don't mind a bit of tinkering and overclocking. It offers the best balance between price and performance. Finally we have the Beastie. Cheap it may be, but slow it certainly is not.



CPU, MEMORY AND MOTHERBOARD

AMD Athlon FX-53 CPU

Goodbye Intel, hello AMD. The FX-53 is bloody expensive, but the fact that it's the fastest gaming processor around meant we had no choice but to fit out The Beast with this speed demon.

\$1258 www.amd.com



Asus SK8N

Yep, it's one incredibly expensive motherboard, but that's what you have to put up with when you want the best of the best. At least you'll know that it's of the highest quality.

\$412 www.asus.com.tw



1GB Corsair TWINX1024-3200XLP

It's all about low latency baby. Unlike DDR2, this stuff is happy to cruise along at a blazing 2-2-2-5 speed. Lightspeed here we come.

\$695 www.corsairmemory.com



Zalman 7000A-Cu

The Beast is so chunky, so wild and untameable that you need a real man's cooler stuck on the top of your mighty CPU. Zalman delivers, offering a chunk of metal that performs well and isn't too screamingly loud.

\$79 www.zalman.co.kr



Antec TruePower 550W

With 550 watts of blistering power you can plug in as many crazy case fans, cooling systems and front-mounted LCD panels as you like and still enjoy smooth, reliable gaming.

\$200 www.antec-inc.com



VIDEO, AUDIO AND CONNECTIVITY

Abit RX800XT RADEON X800XT

A grand just for the video card? Hey, if it was any cheaper we'd have our readers complaining that it's not beast-worthy.

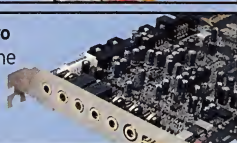
\$990 www.abit.com.tw



Creative Soundblaster Audigy 2 ZS Platinum Pro

The most powerful consumer-level soundcard on the market. Support for every sound format, including Dolby 6.1 surround.

\$499 australia.creative.com



Logitech Z680

Let your soundcard handle all the decoding and plug these Power Award winning speakers into the ports on the back. You've never heard PC speakers like these.

\$699 www.logitech.com



STORAGE AND OPTICAL

Sony DRU700A Dual Layer

Dual Layer burning is the way of the future. Not only does it allow for wads of storage, we can now backup our DVD collection without compression.

\$349 www.sony.com.au



Samsung 816BRPS 16x DVD-ROM

It's straight up and down, it's cheap, it's fast, it works well and you need it to copy - sorry, back up - DVDs using your nifty writer.

\$62 www.samsung.com.au



2x Western Digital 74GB Raptor WD740D RAID 0

Sure, they're not the biggest hard drives on the planet, but they're arguably the fastest. And with a name like Raptor, it's obvious they were created just for our Beast.

\$860 www.westerndigital.com



DISPLAY, INPUT AND COSMETICS

17" Samsung 172x

It's might only be a 17" monitor, but it has the viewable area of a 19" CRT, at a fraction of the size. Blurring is a thing of the past due to the 12ms response time.

\$900 www.samsung.com.au



Antec P160

This beast of a case is perfect for a beast of a PC. A couple of temperature gauges on the front make it perfect for letting you know when your system is about to explode.

\$250 www.antec-inc.com



MS Wireless Optical Elite Desktop Pack

Keyboards and mice don't get much snazzier than this delectable combo.

\$210 www.microsoft.com.au



Panasonic PT-AE500E

Who needs a piddly monitor when this baby will throw a high resolution (1280 x 720) image 2.5m wide across the closest wall? The ultimate gaming experience.

\$3,899 www.panasonic.com.au



BEAST VALUE:

\$11362

THE MUTANT

Thanks to the popularity of overclocking and tweaking, we've included this machine to show you exactly what you can get away with for a very reasonable price. Tweaked to within an inch of its life, this is the machine we DO own, versus the Beast, which is the machine we'd like to be able to AFFORD to own.

Intel P4 2.8GHz "C" at 3.3GHz

This speedy little processor has the benefit of being overclockable to around the 3.3GHz mark at least. Hyperthreading support is a treat.
\$300 www.intel.com



Abit A17

An 865PE based mobo from Abit, the A17 has a very handy feature in that you can overclock your system directly from the Windows desktop. Which means you needn't delve into the confusing BIOS options ever again.
\$195 www.abit.com.tw



MS Wireless Optical Elite Desktop Pack

Sure, this combo isn't exactly cheap, but you can't skimp on the interface between you and your box of love. And it's all wireless, making it perfect to use from the comfort of your couch.
\$257 www.microsoft.com.au



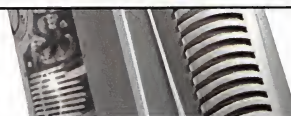
Antec TrueControl 550W

What could be groovier than a PSU that comes with a 5.25" front plate with dials and knobs for controlling fan speed plastered all over it? Nothing, that's what.
\$210 www.antec-inc.com



Antec PlusView 1000AMG

An excellent pre-modded case, with more than enough fan mounts to keep your oc'd system nice and chillin'. And with this machine, you'll definitely make the most of the side window.
\$171 www.antec-inc.com



1GB Corsair TWINX-3200C2

Damn memory is getting cheap. Who'd have thought a year ago that you could now pick up a gig of ridiculously fast DDR-RAM for a mere \$377? Not us, that's for sure.
\$377 www.corsairmemory.com



XpertVision RADEON 9800XT

Amusingly, the video card is the single most expensive component of the Mutant. It's hard to believe that you can now get a RADEON 9800XT for a mere \$440, considering just how blazingly fast this video card is.
\$440 www.xpertvision.com.tw



Zalman VGA Heatpipe Cooler 80C-HP

Bolt this mighty thing to your video card, attach the included fan, and who knows what insane core speeds you can achieve?
\$68 www.zalman.co.kr



120GB Seagate IDE

The first upgrade HDD I ever bought was 6GB and cost \$447. So this is pretty damn cheap. Only standard IDE, but at this price we can't complain.
\$146 www.seagate.com



Creative SB Audigy

Lacks a few of the features found on the Audigy 2, but only the ones that don't really have much effect on gaming. There's a lot of soundcard here for not much cost.
\$129 australia.creative.com



Creative Inspire 6.1 6600

They're so cheap they're good enough for the Mutant. No decoder, no difficult optical inputs, just ordinary wires plugging in to a set of extraordinary speakers.
\$249 australia.creative.com



Samsung 816BPRS 16x DVD-ROM

Same as the Beast, this drive is fast, dependable and has a slightly funkier facade than most of the beige monstrosities currently available.
\$62 www.samsung.com.au



Samsung 252BRNS 52x24x52 CD-RW

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\$59 www.samsung.com.au



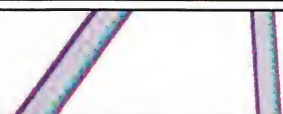
19" Samsung 995 Dynafiat

Cheaper than the video card but still a lot of sleek, flat monitor. Nineteen inches is pretty much the minimum for decent gaming, and we can't wait until a 16ms LCD this big costs this much.
\$545 www.samsung.com.au



4x Antec Internal Illuminate

Pep up the Mutant with a few light sticks. Stick 'em on the monitor, in the case, wherever you like. USB powered and respond to sound - clap on, clap off! Other cosmetic additions to the Creature are limited only by your imagination..
\$176 www.antec-inc.com



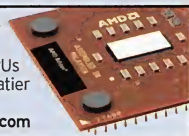
MUTANT VALUE: \$3319

the beastie

The cheapest but worthiest PC of all, the Beastie is for all of us who need gaming, the web and to generally have fun without worrying about overclocking or our bank account.

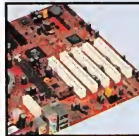
AMD -Athon XP 2500+ Barton

The cheapest CPUs keep getting meatier and meatier
\$146 www.amd.com



Abit NF7

nForce2 is good and this implementation of it is even better
www.abit.com.tw \$132



Antec Lanboy

Includes a 350W power supply, window and carry strap.
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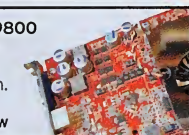
512MB Corsair PC-3200

A budget PC with half a gig of RAM. All praise the open market.
\$220 www.corsairmemory.com



Elsa RADEON 9800

Yes, a 9800 in a budget system. Holy shit batman.
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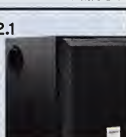
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Plug 'em in to the nForce2's onboard sound and it's MP3-tastic!
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17" Samsung SyncMaster 753S

To think 17" monitors were once worth \$800. I love the technology of the future.
\$226 www.samsung.com.au



MS Internet Value Pack

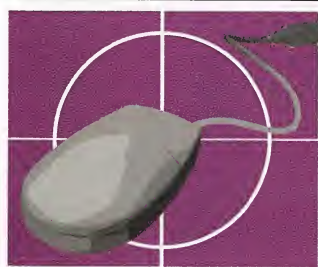
Not content with owning your OS world, MS are now ruling the I/O roost.
\$64 www.kmepc.com



beastie value: \$1758

So, you want one of these three fine beasts? Luckily, all of these components are available at
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The Hub

YOUR ONLINE GAMING SERVER

Hosted by Ed Dawson

Star Wars Overdose

"The Force can have a strong influence on a weak mind."

Everybody loves Star Wars, right? Well, at least we can say that (almost) everybody loves the good old original trilogy, or Episodes IV-VI. There's been a resurgence in Star Wars games in recent times, such as the stellar Knights of the Old Republic, Star Wars Galaxies and Jedi Academy. Coming up, there's Republic

Commando, KOTOR II and Star Wars:

Battlefront, the BF1942-styled FPS

shot out of the Lucas canon (pun intended). And this is well and

good. What is mystifying, however, is the continual

efforts by mod creators to

mine the content

encyclopedia of Darth Vader

and friends for subject

matter when there's literally

unlimited possibilities

within their own

imagination. Doesn't anyone

rely on their own ideas and raw

creativity any more?

BF1942 got a solid treatment with the mod Star Wars:

Galactic Conquest, which had

great renditions of Hoth,

Bespin cloud city and AT-ST

walkers. Also, there's the

UT2004 Troopers: Dawn of

Destiny (see review this

issue) and the Jedi Academy

total conversion into Attack

of the Clones assets. This



last one is unusual, being a mod of a Star Wars game, which adjusts the experience into a slightly different era of Star Wars. Again, this preludes a retail release by LucasArts which will cover almost exactly the same material in Republic Commando.

Strangest of all, there's been an absence of legal responses to these attempts to ride the popularity wave on the back of elderly George - in the 1990s, Aliens Quake was shutdown by Fox so fast it left the authors' heads

spinning. Yet somehow, faced with a raft of Star Wars derivative mod creations, there's been an odd mood of leniency. That's undoubtedly a good thing for the mod creator community, although authors should take note - the Star Wars theme is close to saturation point - best to choose another theme, or invent a new one to avoid being overlooked in the noise. If nothing else, the army of Star Wars mods will certainly keep LucasArts on their toes!

STAR WARS: GALACTIC CONQUEST VS STAR WARS: BATTLEFRONT

Here again we have the weird situation in which a mod is set up in direct competition with a commercial game, with exactly the same setting and core content. In this case, they're both large-scale multiplayer experiences along the lines of Battlefield 1942. Both titles seem to be avoiding the sticky subject of the Jedi and Sith, preferring to have a conventional-laser-weapons balance between all players, rather than the inevitable Matrix-style showdown of various force powers on the battlefield. It will be interesting to see how much overlap there is between Battlefront and Galactic Conquest. Has one influenced the other? Galactic Conquest was released first. From the mod creators perspective, imitation by a commercial games company would surely be the highest form of flattery. At the same time, it's not as satisfying as a fat cheque, or a job offer.



Dead Cities V1

For: BF1942 Version: 1 URL: <http://www.planetbattlefield.com/deadcities/> Size: 42MB Score: 3/5

Dead Cities, a mod for BF1942, launches the player into a Mad Max-esque post apocalyptic world, where resources are scarce and humanity is scarcer. The world is split into two warring factions: the Road Rogues, the punk-dressed, hard-rocking henchman of Tina Turner and the Civilian Compound, an enclave of mums and dads who will fight to the death to retain their carefully preserved way of life as it was pre-apocalypse. Of course, these groups really don't mix and things are made worse because they each own items that the other side needs badly. Dead Cities features eight new vehicles, including a groovy Interstate 76-style sporty ute with double machine guns, a wild truck-cum-snowplough and a tanker vehicle with a mounted flamethrower, which actually looks pretty cool. The weapons include the Desert Eagle pistol and the TEC-9 submachinegun as well as crossbows, molotov cocktails and baseball bats. There is one tasty desert mesa map included. Although the setting has been done to death, Dead Cities is still interesting enough to add a new flavour to apocalyptic auto combat.



ORCS GET ANTSY

Biff brought back to the World of Warcraft
Beta testers can all let out a simultaneous "rooaargh!" at the news that they can finally get at each others throats in the hugely anticipated Blizzard MMORPG. A new realm is being added to the beta program that allows Alliance and Horde players to go at large-scale combat with each other, giving the developer a chance to iron out bugs in the PvP code. This new realm will be divided into colour-coded zones, for friendly, enemy and contested territory. Players in their own friendly territory cannot be attacked unless they choose to "Paaanch da caaan!", or initiate battle with their foe.

Grand Prix Legends: 2004 Demo

For: Grand Prix Legends Demo Version: 2004 URL: <http://gplea.racesimcentral.com> Size: 84MB Score: 5/5

Back from the dead, Papyrus and Sierra's 1998 F1 racing title Grand Prix Legends has been given CPR by an avid fan community called the Grand Prix Legends Editor's Association (GPLEA). They obviously consider it as of the greatest F1 racing games of all time, certainly the best game chronicling the 1960s racers which looked like cigars on wheels. These aficionados have lovingly added many custom additions to this classic game, adding features such as additional cars, updated track graphics and improved cameras on to the official demo. These community updates are interesting. For example, they've added the official Honda and Cooper cars, which weren't included in the original game due to licensing issues. They're in there now and they look absolutely stunning. This kind of demo-hacking is usually frowned upon, but this one should be left well alone by Vivendi considering that the original game has essentially vanished and isn't available at retail any more. The FAQ file even features extensive links and research into how to track down a used copy of the full game and buy it on the Internet.



PHANTASY STAR ONLINE

You can play it now! (if you speak Japanese)
Sega has announced that Phantasy Star Online: Blue Burst, the latest title in their popular MMORPG series, has garnered a whopping 100,000 players in the first three weeks of the Japanese language beta. The Phantasy Star Online titles originated on the Dreamcast, spreading to the Gamecube, Xbox and PC (for Japan only). This edition, Blue Burst is an online-only edition of the first and second editions of the game, for PC. Anticipation for the new title was so huge that 50,000 players registered in the very first week, prompting the startled Sega to rapidly upgrade their capacity.



CODEMASTERS LET SOLDIERS BUDDY UP

Four player co-op will feature in Codemasters' WWII game **Soldiers: Heroes of World War II**, an upcoming real-time strategy game by Codemasters, will now have a co-op multiplayer mode which lets up to four players get friendly and work their way through the single player campaign as a team. The new mode is supposedly going to feature new gameplay outcomes and increase the tactical options at players' disposal. A special anti-piracy and gaming security program will guard against players using cheats or those who hack into the game. The game will also support Gamespy Arcade for player matching.

Troopers: Dawn of Destiny 3.0

For: UT 2004 Version: 3.0 URL: <http://www.ut2004troopers.com/> Size: 302MB Score: 4/5



Troopers is clearly the product of a long, careful production process. Environments are excellent and so are effects: crispy showers of sparks, smoke and plasma go flying when a laser bolt strikes a wall, leaving behind a large, nicely detailed burn mark. And being Star Wars, there are a lot of lasers. Troopers applies the same classes that drive BF1942, in complex objective-based teamplay, such as destroy-the-equipment, which for the opposing team is defence of the aforementioned. Combat is fairly lethal, in that most players will drop with two direct hits, also, ammunition is scarce, often scavenged from fallen players - making it a bit like a punishing Star Wars version of Counter-Strike. Yet, in an interesting dynamic, the flying laser bolts of the Star Wars universe travel relatively slowly (of course) - they don't instantly strike, so you're always having to lead your target slightly during the intense firefights. Fallen players can be resurrected by a medic, unless they're hit when they're down. Environments range from a classy Mos Eisley spaceport to a convincing rendition of the swamps of Dagobah. On top of all this, there are pilotable X-Wings and TIE-Fighters. Look out, Galactic Conquest!

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BROADBAND



Ultima V: Lazarus

For: Dungeon Siege Version: 2.0 Alpha URL: www.planetdungeonsiege.com/ultima5/ Size: 89MB Score: 3/5

Continuing the retro revival theme, there's another high-quality project underway, intending to bring the much-adored Ultima V back to life, by conceiving it as a "Siegelet" for the modern Dungeon Siege engine. The amount of work required to create a game the size of Ultima V is simply mindblowing, not to mention the fact that exactly 0.0 percent of the original art can be used, being awful, two-dimensional and minimally animated. But, the community team on the case are attacking it with gusto. Recently they released their Alpha 2.0 version. It's really incredible the lengths these people are going to. Not only are they re-creating the entire score from the original game in CD-quality orchestral music they are also adding new music tracks using updated technology (it's no longer PC speaker or Ad Lib audio!). They are also adding considerably to the story, including fleshing out the background of key characters such as the evil Blackthorn. There's also new characters, new side quests, improved town and dungeon maps. Overall, this looks set to become a professional looking re-creation of the classic game. However, purists may lament the bastardisation of this hallowed creation of Lord British.



SPRUNGING UP THE EVERQUEST

The treadmill MMORPG gets a major fan-driven revision. At a real-life event called the Guild Summit held in June, Sony Online Entertainment captured the feedback of around seventy players from the United States. At what must have looked like some kind of godly medieval millennium fair, the avid fans engaged with the Everquest Live team, resulting in hundreds of suggestions which will be built into the game. The results are too many to mention, but include increased range of the /corpse function and improvements to administration for Raid leaders. To read the full list, visit <http://eqlive.station.sony.com>.

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Online Tips and Tactics

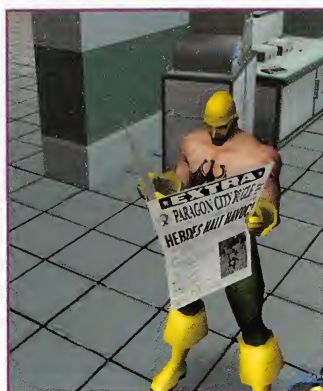
CITY OF HEROES

Need a mentor to guide you through the crime-infested streets of Paragon City? Eliot Fish slips on his lycra pants...



1. Face the Danger

If you've only just started out and have a fairly low-level character, then there's no shame in offering to be a sidekick. Just ask. Whilst fighting close to your mentor (who must be around 5 levels higher than you) your attack and defense ratings are boosted - temporarily making you of a similar level. XP is still proportionate to your "real" level though, so don't expect to be able to powerlevel this way. Sidekicking is simply a way of being able to hang out and team with more powerful friends and see high level content without dying every time a bad guy sneezes in your direction.



2. Be Emotional

It seems that new players always want to know the Newspaper pose... Just type "/em newspaper" to have your hero pull out a copy of the Paragon Bugle - perfect for when you want to leave the keyboard (in which case you can also use /em afk) or when you just want to comically poke fun at someone who's taking a long time doing something.



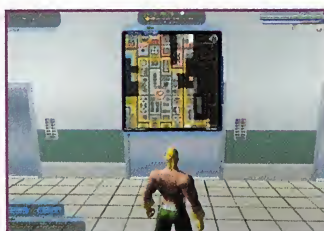
3. Super Macros

Combine commands, emotes or powers into a single key press with the in-game macros. Once created, macros drop into an empty tray slot and can be dragged and dropped. To attack an enemy and display a speech balloon with a witty shout, type: /macro Smite "powexec_slot 1\$\$ local Have at you!" This will have you use the power in slot 1 whilst yelling "Have at you!" at your target. Try binding emotes with your most commonly used phrases to save you typing it all out or selecting an action from the menu. Suddenly, role-playing your hero just became a whole lot easier.



4. Come Get Some

If you're playing as a Scrapper or Tanker, it can be hugely beneficial to acquire the Taunt power. Taunt a villain in a group to get him to come over to you, allowing you to easily dispatch him without getting teamed by the rest of his posse. This makes it a lot easier for the roaming melee character to get XP without having to endlessly search for high enough level villains that aren't in a large group. Taunt will also pull back those pesky crims who try to do a runner...



5. Point the Way

Never neglect your Nav bar. If running missions and a regular contact is on the same map as you, you don't need to run all the way to them - just click on Contacts. If there's no Call option yet, then you need to get to know them a little better. A single click on the map will also mark a waypoint on a location, otherwise you can set your own waypoint anywhere on the map by right-clicking. If you need to find a Trainer, remember they are always represented by a green icon on the map, while purple icons are contacts.



6. Who's The Boss?

When attacking a group of bad guys, make sure you figure out who is the biggest threat and target them first. For instance, some villains replenish the health of those around them, or have the ability to cast crippling spells that will confuse, disable and bind your heroes. Make sure you knock these nasties out first, and then worry about the other baddies. When teaming, make sure to let your friends know who to go for first. If you can, you should try to lure or "pull" single enemies away from larger groups.



7. Regeneration

If you're playing a Scrapper and have chosen Martial Arts or other powers that disorient or knockdown your enemies, you should seriously consider combining it with the Regeneration power. Although it is fairly slow at lower levels, the ability to recover health faster than other heroes makes this a very attractive ability. When you reach level 28, you'll have access to Instant Healing, a power that will heal your wounds almost as fast as your enemies can inflict them.



8. Tired of Running?

If you're starting to get annoyed with running large distances across the map, you can always send out a request for someone to teleport you to where you need to go. Just use the Request channel. Sometimes you'll be pleasantly surprised by a sudden teleport to your destination by a friendly hero after you've started the long lonely trek towards your waypoint. Never be afraid to ask.



9. The Super Team

It's crucial, when playing as part of a team, that you remain aware at all times of the status of your teammates. No one will appreciate it if you pull half a dozen thugs towards your group whilst half of them are still recuperating endurance or health! Just don't rush ahead of the group and engage in combat unless everyone is ready. You might need advice from your leader on which bad guy to target first anyhow. Also, between battles, how about trading some of those overflowing Inspirations to more needy teammates? It'll benefit everyone if you share it around.



10. Helping Hand?

If you're exploring the city and you see another hero pounding into some foes or getting pounded by foes, sometimes it's best to just leave them be unless they cry out for help. There's nothing more annoying than having a battle fully under control until someone comes along and starts finishing off all the enemies you've been fighting. It should be clear to anyone who's played a MMOG before - don't steal other players' kills. It's not always a huge Experience Point issue in City of Heroes, but it can spoil other players' fun.

The Secret Diary of MMO Planetside

Chapter 2 - My Life in the Service by George Soropos

I finally got myself into an Outfit a few days ago, the biggest one on Markov. 'Death To All' or D2A if you're in a hurry. It's good to have a family. Hopefully I can now avoid ugly situations like the one I found myself in last week. Not sure if I should write about this but I suppose if I can't be honest with myself who can I be honest with?

We met on Ishunder during an attack on the Vanu Dropship centre in Akkan. She was wearing a perfectly fitted infiltration suit, lightweight but clingy in all the right places. Told me her name was Darksy and that she was a bomber pilot specialist. Man, was I gone fast. A babe who can fly? Yeah things were definitely looking up.

So I made some small talk about the latest news reports, the ebb and flow of battle, combat tactics and last night's episode of Markov Idol. Darksy mentioned that she liked this season's new gimmick of including a judge from each empire. I told her that I liked the fact that both the judges and the contestants were armed this time around. She also concurred that limiting friends and relatives in the audience to small calibre sidearms was a sensible precaution.

I've never been a Casanova with the ladies but I can handle myself OK with a few drinks under my belt, and a some stims down my throat. Maybe that's why I agreed to be a gunner in her Liberator in an upcoming raid, or most likely it was the unmentioned promise of some post combat yee-haa in a nice secluded spot somewhere. Yup that was definitely it.

She proved to be a good pilot and an even better bomber, unfortunately we still got caught

and wasted by a group of New Conglomerate Anti Air MAX units hiding in a ravine, we lit up the sky with our burning carcasses for a few seconds and then had our consciousness jammed back into a brand new slab of meat at a nearby base.

This was sweet. A new friend, maybe a 'special' friend, some flying, great! Aside from the getting blasted out of the sky bit. I popped out of the rebirthing chamber, re-equipped my standard gear and, trying to look as casual as possible, scoped around for Darksy to grab another ride, of any kind. Dammit, had she gone to another rebirth centre? I sent her a private message on the comms channel only to be told that she is no longer on the network? Did her self-state system crash? Had she been data dumped to Windoze, that digital hell from which there was no return?

"Hi Vimes."

I turned and saw a reinforced exo-suit standing in front of me, decidedly uncurvy. The name 'BigKev' hung over his head. It didn't ring any bells.

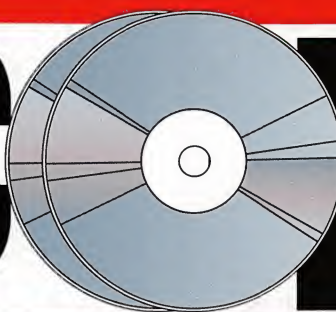
"C'mon Vimes," he said. "I'm getting serious now, let's go take out those bastard MAX's that shot us down."

Ugh, did I feel like the biggest n00b in Auraxis. My erotic hopes and fantasies turned to ashes in my mind so quickly it must have shown all over my face. BigKev laughed and, of course, called me a n00b. In this new world of rebirthing and immortal warfare we could be whoever we wanted to be, even several different people. Why had I forgotten that? Dammit.

"Yeah OK BigKev, let's go and smash their armoured butts."



THE DISC



REQUESTS

We welcome requests so please forward your requests to Disc Producer Amos Hong via email at cdgod@next.com.au or write to PCPP DVD Requests, 78 Renwick St, Redfern NSW 2016



Welcome once again to the magical world that is the PC PowerPlay disc. This month, you will find free games, demos, trailers, patches, wallpapers and more as you explore the DVD and CD. So jump in and check out all the disc goodness!

The Demos page includes several fun and exciting games to play. Use stealth and the shadows to avoid being seen as you play as master thief, Garrett in Thief: Deadly Shadows. The DVD also has a playable demo of Silent Storm: Sentinels, the expansion for the original Silent Storm.

The new Extras section, which replaces the Spotlight section, will offer much incredible stuff like free games, anime episodes and other cool stuff. This month, have a go at Steel Panthers - World at War, a tactical war game. This game is absolutely FREE, thanks to the good people at Matrix Games. Also this month there are two DVD anime episodes - Azumanga Daioh and Angry Kid.

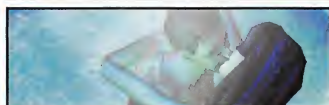
In the Trailers page, check out the Counter Strike Source movie. Named after the Half-Life 2 Engine, CS Source will utilise many of the engine's new features and technology.

There are five mods available in the Mods section. With several requests for more UT2004 mods, we've included 3 UT 2004 mods. They are AirBuccaneers 4.1, Alien Swarm v1.0 and Troopers: Dawn of Destiny 3.0 [UT2004]. The other two mods are for Battlefield: 1942 and Dungeon Siege.

The Wallpapers section is a new addition to the disc. Thanks to the guys at GameWallpapers.com who have supplied us with these wallpapers, this page will have some incredible game wallpapers, featuring some of your favourite games like Thief, S.T.A.L.K.E.R and BloodRayne.

Amos Hong
Disc Master
cdgod@next.com.au

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DEMOS

Aqua Digger 3-D
Aura: Fate of the Ages
Ballance
Blades of Avernum
Chaos League
Cold War Conflict: Days in the Field 1950-1973
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Joint Operations:
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Road Trip 2004
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Angry Kid [DVD Episode]
Steel Panthers - World at War [FREE GAME]

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Evil Genius
SW: KoTOR II: the Sith Lords
LotR: TBfM

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Battlefield Vietnam v1.02
Besieger v1.2.5
Colin McRae Rally 04 v1.01
Splinter Cell: PT v1.3 [Euro/Asia]
LO:MAC v1.00 - 1.02 [US]
Thief: Deadly Shadows v1.1
UT 2004 v3236



BUNKER

Heaps more wallpaper, free games, Winamp skins, map packs and addon files for all your favourite games. Come get some!

UTILITIES

Catalyst Radeon Display Driver 4.6 8.02 - f
DivX Player (with DivX Codec) 5.1.1 - f
Windows Media Player 9 - f
Winamp 5.03 - f
WinRAR 3.3 - s
WinZip 9.0 - s
Xfire - f



WALLPAPERS

Several incredible game wallpapers of your favourite games like BloodRayne 2, Silent Hill 4, S.T.A.L.K.E.R, V8 Supercars 2 to put on your desktop. All supplied by GameWallpapers.com.

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Miss Gaming Australia

In which we show Donald Trump how we do things in OUR neighbourhood!

People deal with different things in different ways. I dealt with 20 year-old Aussie Jennifer Hawkins winning the Miss Universe beauty pageant slash scholarship program by chugging a crownie (no mean achievement) and flipping the channel to sneer at CSI. The Australian independent gaming industry dealt with it by immediately launching a beauty pageant of their own, and surprisingly enough the major distributors came along for the ride.

Naturally, I was invited. Or, to be more precise, I wasn't NOT invited. So I rented a dusty tux from a dusty tux rental business on Parramatta Road and jogged along in my yellow boots. The boots had been specially cleaned for the event because, well, I was single at the time and you never know, right?

The Australian gaming industry seems to have some kind of obsession with the Superdome at Olympic Park, so I was unsurprised to learn that the pageant was to be held there. The whole place had been converted into a grotesque low-budget cornucopia of tack and swimsuit models. There was so much flesh on display, the predominately male audience couldn't figure out whether they were supposed to ogle the girls or the 43" plasma display some Chinese company was offering as a lucky door prize.

L-, the editor of the recently defunct unofficial Nintendo magazine, appeared at my elbow.

"Nice tux," he said.

"Thanks, I rented it myself," I replied.

We stood awkwardly off to the side of the massive stage that appeared to have been constructed mainly of cardboard packing crates and duct-tape. On the side furthest from us, a hardware mag called HardNUT had set up a stall, like they did at every gathering of anything, regardless of whether the gathering in question even had stalls. This one didn't. Except for HardNUT's.

The editor of the still-funct-but-only-just pseudo-unofficial PS2 magazine, Meatloaf, appeared at my other elbow.

"I heard the big players are gonna be here tonight," he rumbled. "Reckon their chicks will be hot?"

It was an important question. The pageant was designed to promote the importance and significance of women in game development, publishing, distribution and marketing by forcing them to parade around a stage in bikinis. All in all, it was Meatloaf's kind of gig.

"Wow!" said the overwhelmed but underwhelming male host as he bounced onto the stage in a hail of spotlights and polite jeers from the assembled host. "What a great and inspiring day this is! For just one day the Earth has spun a little faster because we've got so many beautiful women - who are smart and interesting too, but mainly beautiful - gathered in this the greatest superdome in Australia: the Australia Superdome!"



"Yes Hank!" said the female host, which was odd because the male's host name was Jeremy. "In all my days modelling and as a PR shock trooper for top agency Sulk" - a brief cheer from the surviving members of Sulk who were doing vodka shots at the bar - "I never saw so many beautiful women gathered together under one superdome. Surely the world is indeed spinning a little faster tonight because of what Hank said just then." She beamed mindlessly at the likewise mindless crowd.

"Jeremy," said Jeremy.

"Where?" said the female host, whose name escapes me. Flair, or Flower or something like that. Her gown was cut in that certain special way that made it look both really expensive and really cheap at the same time.

"Let's welcome our ladies!" said Jeremy smoothly, as a bunch of reasonably attractive but otherwise non-descript women began to oscillate onto the stage. "First up here's Cindy Simpleton representing THQ. And then Kate Vampnets, from Vivendi. Now here's the beautiful Lola Ginabrigida from EA. Ah yes, the delightful Casey Monotheism from Microsoft. Now let's welcome Jeannette 'Moulin' Rouge of Ubisoft! And finally, Misty Torquefail, from Red Ant." The audience clapped politely as Misty collapsed gracefully off the stage and fell heavily into HardNUT's stall. A bunch of other women from the various distributors, indie publishers and PR agencies followed (across the stage that is, not into HardNUT's by now rather wilted stall), but for some reason didn't rate an individual mention.

"Now!" intoned Flair or Flower. "Let combat be joined!"

Jeremy coughed politely.

"Actually, we've decided not to go with the

battle-to-the-death as the programme indicates" - there was a disappointed groan from a very particular section of the crowd - "but instead have our top six answer some questions."

Top six? I wondered. Apparently, it had all been pre-decided. All the indie publishers had been given the arse, as usual, and only the big players were getting any representation. Microsoft was first at the mike.

"I have a deep commitment to setting goals and achieving them," said Cindy. Apparently the questions had been pre-decided too.

"I have a deep commitment to breathing in, then out, then in, then out," said Vivendi's Kate Vampnets.

"A lot of people say they don't like getting up in the morning, but I really do," said EA's Lola Ginabrigida.

"Je dormirai avec vous, si vous votez pour moi," said Ubi Soft's Jeannette "Moulin" Rouge prettily, in bad French. Was she putting it on for the visiting dignitaries? Only her hairdresser could tell for sure...

"Gnrgh," said Red Ant's Misty Torquefail from atop a pile of back-issues and video card giveaways. "Whu? Who? A political struggle! A political struggle!" Supported by close friends, she was picked up out of the remains of HardNUT's stall and carried gently away.

"Our beautiful top six! Uh, five!" cried Jeremy, with an imperious wave of his hand.

Unfortunately, his chunky university ring caught Flair or Flower right on the tip of the nose and split it down to the cartilage. Blood fountained. Cindy of Microsoft collapsed in a dead faint. The editor of HardNUT, who was clawing at the stage trying to exact brutal revenge, had to be restrained. Meatloaf, standing next to me, was eating six pigs-in-blankets at once. L- was picking his nose. I was faintly bored.

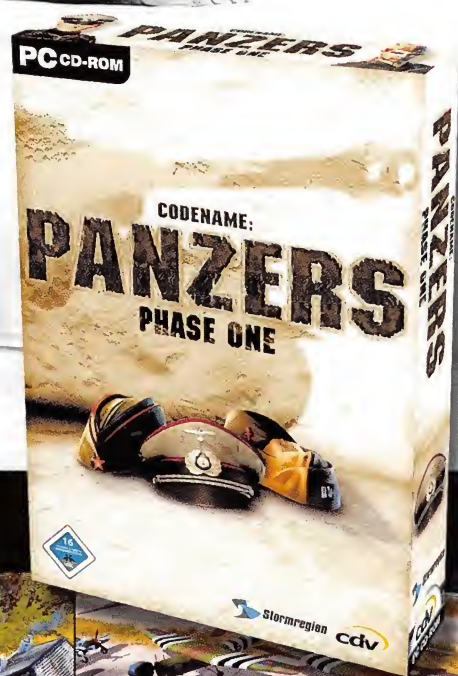
Then a brand new Ford Escape exploded through the rear wall of the stage and revved its engine aggressively. Bits of bunting floated down from the rafters in the stunned silence. An untenably hot woman in an irresponsibly small bikini stood up from behind the wheel and fired a flare gun out over the heads of the frankly delighted audience.

"Behold!" she cried, "I am Avarice Liability, of Blind Drunk, the greatest distributor/publisher in Australia! And I claim the crown as mine by divine right!"

The cheering almost deafened me. Avarice exited the vehicle, revealing herself to be standing on eight-inch stilettos, stalked over to the cowering Jeremy with a look in her eye similar to a female preying mantis after a good shag, and snatched the aluminium crown from his porcelain-white hands. Jamming it on her head, she flipped the crowd the finger, coquettishly turned away and then with a deft backwards-flipping arm movement, tossed her bikini top into the air.

And that's when the crowd rushed the stage.

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